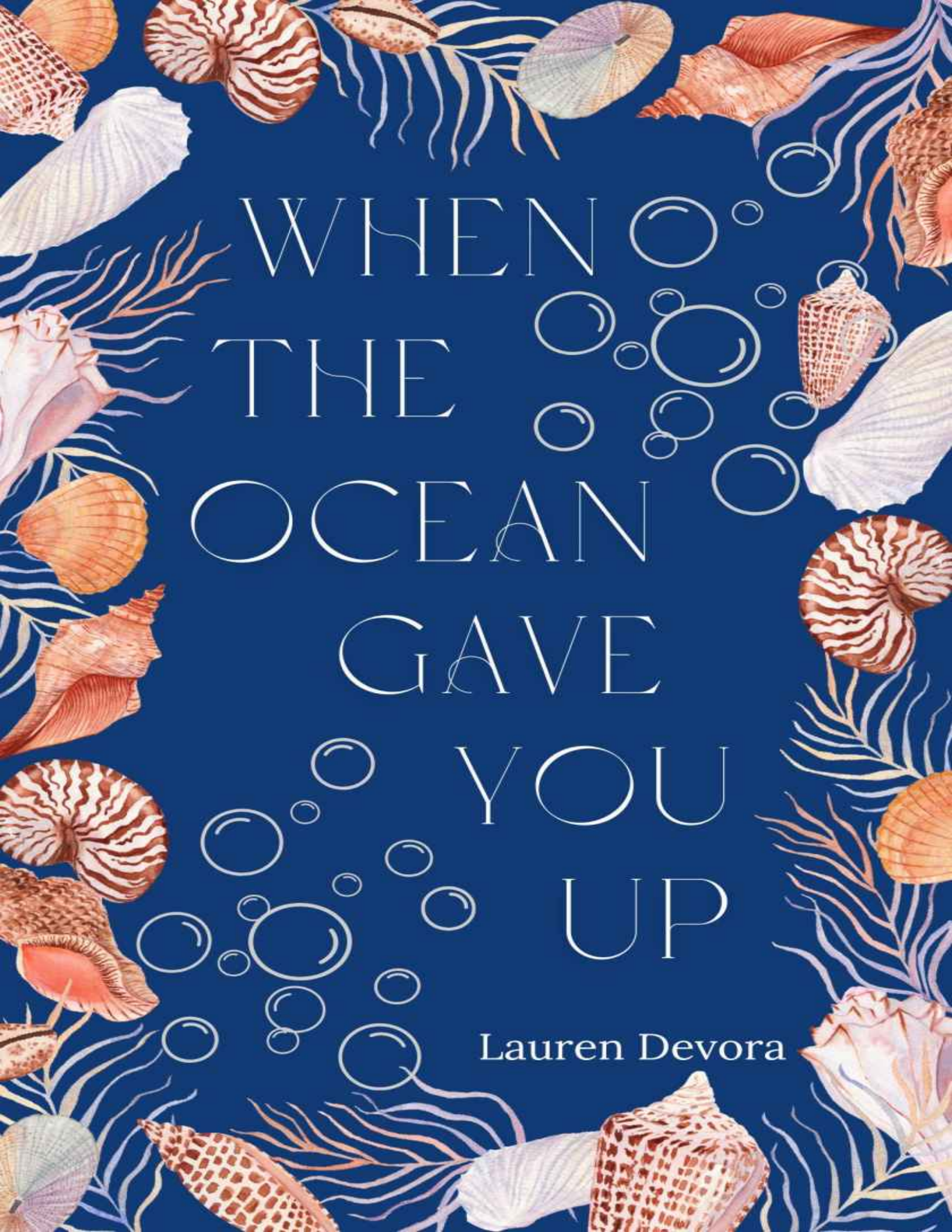
WHEN THE OCEAN GAVE YOU UP
Lauren Devora

When the Ocean Gave You Up

Lauren Devora

To all the Merfolk looking
For their found family
&
To everyone who dreams
Of their happily ever after

Chapter One

Stretching her arms over her head, Rose followed the gravel path she knew by heart through the darkness to the white wooden gate.

Six A.M. What an ungodly perfect time to go running.

East Cove was a ghost town by November first—the tourists all fleeing before the holidays and the snowbirds locking up their summer homes and returning to warmer climates.

Winter was a full breath after an eight-month sprint.

That didn't make it easier to get up before the sun, though.

Adjusting her earbuds, and tightening the reflective armband that held her cellphone, Rose turned on her running playlist and began her warm-up.

Crossing the street, she moved onto the sidewalk that hugged the rocky shoreline so close at times she could feel spray from the crashing waves.

With each pound of her feet against the concrete, her to-do list for the day got louder in her head.

Confirm reservations for next month, call Rob about the gutters, get more rock salt from the hardware store, pull out extra mats for the lobby, finalize Lex's night sched—

"Rose, is that you?"

Slowing in front of the Cape Ann style two-story, Rose stared up at the silhouette in a house coat.

"Morning Mrs. Franklin," she said, popping one earbud out.

A herd of Pomeranians rushed past the woman's ankles and down the front steps, yipping as they bumped into each other and the dormant hydrangea bushes.

“Your hair is getting so long,” Mrs. Franklin exclaimed, gesturing to her with an oversized cup of coffee. “You should call Shannon and let her give you a trim.”

Jogging in place, with her scarlet ponytail swinging behind her, Rose tried to shrug. “I don’t really have time for a salon visit, but thank—”

“You work too hard at that inn of yours,” Mrs. Franklin interrupted. “You don’t even close the café in the winter.”

“If I did, the regulars would riot,” she said. “And to be fair, I’m not the one cooking.”

Flexing her fingers to warm them, she glanced sideways at the empty road she wanted to be putting behind her as fast as her legs would allow.

“It’s still a lot of responsibility for a young woman,” Mrs. Franklin said, sipping her coffee. “And all on your own too…”

Rose’s jaw clenched.

Six A.M. was *not* the time for this conversation.

By some miracle, the dogs began to bark, distracting the older woman.

“I better go,” Rose said, picking up speed. “Have a nice day, Mrs. Franklin.”

It wasn’t often she got to *literally* run away from an uncomfortable situation, so she made sure to put power behind her stride.

Buying the Whittaker Inn hadn’t been easy.

The bank loans themselves were enough to give her a panic attack. Adding in the repairs and furnishings and insurance and Rose had spent more than one night Googling the legalities and possible income of selling one of her organs.

But three years later, and she couldn’t imagine doing anything else. The phrase ‘labor of love’ was cliché, yet very, very accurate.

Not everyone understood that sentiment.

Following the slope of the road, she stared out at the slate and indigo ocean, watching the dark waves roll towards the shore with ease.

The breeze was gentle, but still icy against her face as she ran.

As she passed, bedroom and kitchen windows in several homes lit up, the families inside stirring and getting ready for a typical weekday. A school bus rumbled up the hill, creaking to a halt at a stop sign a few yards ahead. Another jogger with a Labrador on a leash waved to her as they ran in the opposite direction.

Rose loved witnessing East Cove wake from its slumber.

Turning, she ran down a short side street and looped back, linking up with the coastline again.

As the sky lightened, changing from inky black to lilac, pink, and gold, Rose slowed her gait to take in the beauty of the gentle waves and endless horizon.

Running kept her sane, purging her body of the anxious energy she felt filled to the brim with. And when her runs gave her views like this?

Nothing was better.

Glancing at her watch, Rose picked up her pace, mentally preparing the café opening and the many, many tasks she’d need to accomplish that day.

A strong gust of wind stole her breath, and she ducked her face into the collar of her vest for momentary relief.

The wind only intensified, whirling around her and battering any exposed inch of skin.

Once cottony thin clouds turned voluminous, drawing down from the sky until they nearly grazed the surface of the water.

Rose skidded to a stop, gaping at the storm that had gathered in less than three seconds.

She'd seen hurricanes, Nor'easters, and floods of all kinds, but this…

This was something perilously unknown.

Waves doubled in size, crashing against the dark rocks with enough force she could feel it in her ribcage. Seafoam splashed over the guardrail, wetting her sneakers.

The violet and red clouds swelled, and the hair on her arms stood on end just milliseconds before lightning struck the ocean with a terrifying crack.

Rose screamed, covering her head.

As the water dipped, becoming concave and rotating like the beginnings of a whirlpool, the wind whipped faster, nearly deafening her.

One unnaturally high wave, tinted lavender by the stormy sky, rushed towards the rocky outcropping ahead, hammering down with a quaking boom.

White and grey foam exploded from the impact, raining down on the sidewalk and road yards away.

And then the winds died. The sea returned to its gravitational rhythm. The clouds dissipated.

It was as if the storm had never occurred.

Squinting at the boulders hit by the giant wave, Rose spotted something that made her stomach turn.

The reptilian part of her brain screamed.

A person… A body…

Someone was on the rocks.

“Oh my God,” she breathed.

Alive or dead, she knew what a human being looked like.

And one had just been slung onto shore like a goddamn ragdoll.

“Oh shit. Oh shit, oh shit…” She chanted, bolting at full speed towards the figure.

Vaulting over the safety rail, Rose skidded in the loose pebbles and broken shells. The larger rocks were soaked from the waves and streaked with algae, and she struggled to traverse them, falling twice.

She’d be sore and bruised, but it was nothing in comparison to the injuries she could already imagine the other person had.

“Hold on,” she called out, scrambling up another boulder. “I’m coming! Are you alright?”

No answer.

“Can you hear me? Just—” She slipped, catching herself with the toe of her shoe and a death grip on the granite. “Hang on, okay?”

Logic told her they were dead. They’d have to be. No one could survive a collision like that. And God only knew how long they’d been in the water to begin with.

But Rose didn’t slow her climb. Couldn’t.

With a surge of strength she didn’t know she possessed, she hoisted herself to the top of the tallest boulder, to the unconscious person in a pool of saltwater.

“Oh God, okay,” she stammered, crawling on her knees to their side. “Hey, are you—”

Rolling onto his side, long black hair plastered across his face, the man coughed up a worrisome amount of brackish liquid.

“Holy shit, you’re alive,” Rose gasped, jerking back in surprise. “You’re alive and you’re—Oh God!”

Naked.

Not in his boxers or swimsuit.

He was completely and totally naked.

Rose had to admit his state of undress wasn’t the main issue, but it did add a level of complexity to the situation.

Yanking her puffy vest off, she did her best to cover him, tucking it around his middle.

A woman’s medium couldn’t do much, at least he wasn’t so exposed now.

It took her a moment to realize… he was fine.

No bruises. No broken bones or mangled flesh. No bloody cuts from the rock he landed on.

“Sir?” She asked, leaning over him to pluck wet clumps of hair off his face. “I’m going to get you help, okay? Just hang on. You’re going to be __”

A wide, heavy hand gripped her forearm, yanking her down until they were nose to nose.

Before she could take a breath, he looked up at her with dark violet eyes and…

Smiled.

Wide and brilliant, bright white teeth gleaming—he smiled up at her with all the joy in the world.

His eyelids fluttered closed, hand falling to his chest as he slipped into unconsciousness.

Rose sucked in air until her throat burned.

It defied logic. Nothing about it made sense. No one could explain it.

Not Rose. Not the paramedics. Not the neighbors who came out to watch the freak storm.

Before long, East Cove was abuzz with rumors about the man who washed ashore and the woman who saved him.

* * * * * * *

“Rose?” Her mother sounded pithier through the phone. “Rose, is it true?”

Dodging around an orderly pushing a gurney, she rushed down the white tiled corridor.

“Yeah, mom,” she said, attempting to keep the strain in her voice to a minimum. “Well, wait. What have you heard?”

“That you found a *body*.”

“Oh, well, then no, it’s not true.”

Pulling up short to avoid crashing into an elderly woman in a hospital issue wheelchair, she glanced around to make sure she was heading in the right direction.

“I found a guy. A man. He was alive—Is! He *is* alive.” Rose inhaled deeply. “I’m just tracking down the doctor now.”

“You’re at the hospital?”

Reading the signs for the different wards, she followed the blue line along the wall marked for the ICU.

“Well, yeah, mom. I wanted to make sure he was okay.” Turning a corner, she quickened her pace, spotting the familiar head of curls and white coat.

“Rose, I’m not sure this is such a good idea,” her mother started. “You don’t know this man. You’ve already done your civic duty by calling

the paramedics. Don't you think—"

"Mom, I have to go, I'm not supposed to be on my phone."

"But Rose—"

"Bye, mom, love you."

Ending the call, Rose jogged the next few yards, sneakers squeaking on the polished floor.

"Excuse me," she called as soon as the doctor paused at the nurses station. "Hi, I'm sorry to bother you. My name's Rose McCleary and I—"

Brown eyes widened. "Mayor McCleary's daughter?"

Shit.

Rose cringed. The name McCleary did not lend itself to anonymity in East Cove.

"Uh, yeah, that's me," she said, forcing a smile. "You see, I came in with—"

"It isn't your father, is it?" The doctor asked, facing her. "I didn't see his name on the board."

"No, no, dad's fine. I'm here for the man found on the rocks."

The doctor's expression was comical.

Waving her hand out, Rose said, "Let me clarify. Paramedics brought in a man that washed up on shore. I was the one who found him, and I'm just trying to see if he's okay or if he has family I should—"

"Ohhh, yes, I'm with you now," she said, flipping a page in the chart she held. "The slightly hypothermic John Doe."

Stepping closer half an inch, Rose put on her best 'trust me' face and asked, "Is he doing okay? I mean, I know I'm not family, but…"

After a moment of deliberation, the doctor yielded.

Sometimes having the name McCleary was beneficial.

“His vitals are stable, and he doesn’t seem to have sustained any injuries from the impact on the rocks.” She leaned one elbow on the edge of the intake desk. “He does have some memory loss though.”

“Some?”

The doctor frowned. “Quite a lot, actually. He doesn’t remember anything before washing up on shore. Not his name, not where he’s from, or even why he was in the water to begin with.” She flattened her lips briefly. “He’s also mute.”

Rose stared expectantly, unsure of where she was going with this.

“It could be a manifestation of PTSD, or a preexisting condition, but he hasn’t spoken a word. He only nods and shakes his head to answer questions.”

“Does he speak—er, well, understand—English?”

“Yes, he understands everyone fine. And he’s an extremely pleasant patient. Not something we get every day.” She chuckled lightly, handing a nurse the chart in her hand.

Rose fought the urge to wring her hands.

“Can I… I mean, is it alright if I see him?”

“Just for a short while. He needs to rest,” she said. “He’s in room three-thirteen. Last I checked he was awake and very intrigued by the Jell-O cups we gave him.”

Excusing herself to make her rounds, the doctor left Rose to navigate the hall on her own.

Luckily, his room wasn’t far.

Knocking out of habit, she waited a solid three seconds before remembering the man couldn’t verbally tell her to come in.

Off to a great start, Rose.

Twisting the knob, she called, “Hi there. I hope it’s okay if I just… Well, the doctor said you were in here and, uh… Anyway, I’m—”

All her blathering stopped the moment she saw him.

Covered in a flimsy hospital gown and several beige blankets, propped up by the angle of the bed and the multitude of pillows behind him, he looked much healthier than the last time she’d seen him.

And drier too.

Bright eyes met hers and a smile broke across his handsome face.

With a cup of green Jell-O in one hand, he waved at her with all the enthusiasm of a child spotting their best friend at the supermarket.

A relieved laugh bubbled in Rose’s chest, but she swallowed it down.

“Wow, do you look better than the last time I saw you.”

He dropped his hand to his stomach, plucking at the hospital gown as he looked down at himself. Glancing at her, he arched an eyebrow in question.

“I, uh, I just meant you’re not in a coma or something.”

He smiled again and Rose exhaled slowly, comforted by the fact he wasn’t injured or waterlogged or…

Well, it helped that he wasn’t stark naked anymore too.

Motioning to the stiff plastic chair next to his hospital bed, she asked, “Do you mind if I sit?”

Shifting as if he was going to stand, Rose hurried closer.

“No, no, you stay there,” she urged. “I think you’ve earned cot privileges for a while.”

Sitting a respectable distance away, she folded her hands in her lap, fidgeting with the sleeves of her shirt.

He stared at her with fascination.

His bright gaze bounced around, taking in the details of her face, her messy ponytail, the twitching of her fingers and the nervous shift of her feet beneath the chair as she crossed and uncrossed her ankles over and over.

Rose opened and closed her mouth three times before committing to a sentence.

“My name’s Rose, by the way,” she said. “I’m really glad you’re okay after… all that.”

He grinned and the anxious energy in her body settled.

“The doctor told me you don’t remember how you got in the water,” she said.

He shook his head, mouth quirking in a gentle ‘no, I don’t’ expression that lacked frustration.

Not only did he not know how he wound up in such a predicament, but he didn’t seem all that concerned about it. As if he’d misplaced a receipt or forgot to stop for gas on the way home, not nearly drowned in the Atlantic.

“The doctor also said you don’t remember your name,” she continued. “They’re calling you John Doe, but that doesn’t really suit you…”

With his long black hair pulled back into a loose ponytail, and strong, angular features, he looked just shy of aristocratic. Like he should have ‘the third’ tacked onto the end of his name.

Except nobility didn’t fit his energy either.

Expressive dark eyebrows, wide smile that brought out one dimple on the left side of his face, and an openness that felt totally inherent and not due to his lack of memories.

“We’ll come up with something,” she said. “’Cause I certainly can’t keep calling you Naked Water Guy.”

Rose wanted to smack herself.

He only made a soft rumbling deep in his chest—the closest thing to a chuckle she assumed he could manage.

At least he wasn't offended.

"Did the doctor say when she'd be releasing you?"

He shrugged, looking up at the clock.

"Today?"

He shook his head.

"Tomorrow?"

Tilting his chin, she took it to mean 'maybe'.

Rose's left knee began to bounce.

After asking if he had a place to stay—which of course, he didn't know—she leaned forward, pressing her elbows into the tops of her thighs.

Maybe the tumble she'd taken getting to him had scrambled her mind a bit.

Maybe she felt overly sympathetic for the man with no memory.

Either way, she didn't have an explanation for the next sentence out of her mouth.

"I, uh… I run a bed and breakfast in town. Own it, actually. And it's the off season, so we don't have that many guests right now. If you'd like… You can stay with me."

Ocean-violet eyes widened, staring up at her.

"Only if you want. There's no pressure. You don't have to if—"

He nodded vigorously, bed squeaking a little beneath him.

"Yeah?"

He continued nodding, confirming his answer.

Rose beamed.

She didn’t know how he’d wound up in the water, or how he’d survived such a crazy storm, but at least she knew he’d have a safe roof over his head once he was medically cleared.

His expression turned urgent, glancing around his meager hospital set up. As if needing to give something to her in return, he offered her his last green Jell-O cup.

Still smiling, Rose politely declined.

Chapter Two

"You *what*?"

She pulled the phone away from her ear, grimacing. "Mom…"

"Rose McCleary, I cannot believe you're letting a strange man stay with you. A strange man with *medical conditions*."

Turning down the lane leading around the back of the Whittaker, Rose rolled her eyes.

"You don't have to say it like that."

"Well, doesn't he?"

"I mean…yes, he has something going on with him, but the doctor said he's okay. He's not unhinged or injured. He's not even dehydrated." Rose glanced at her to-go coffee with longing. "I can't even say that about myself."

"Rose, this is a bad idea," her mother warned. "What if there are people coming for this man? What if he remembers who he is and he's dangerous?"

Images of the man with the bright smile popped into her head. The one who loved Jell-O and was startled by the television and did everything the nurses instructed him to with utter gentleness.

"At least he'd know who he is when he decided to ax-murder me," Rose deadpanned.

Her mother sighed heavily into the phone. "Your father is going to have a coronary."

Parking in the gravel 'employees only' lot, Rose cut the engine and climbed out of her 4Runner, balancing her phone, coffee, and keys in her hands.

Halfway around to the backseat to retrieve her purse, Rose spotted a familiar truck in the guest lot and squinted.

“Hey, mom,” she started warily. “You never told me *how* you found out this guy is staying with me.”

“Oh, um… I think it was…” Her mother’s voice dropped to an incoherent level. “Oh goodness, I forgot I’m supposed to be in a committee meeting. I’ll talk with you later, Rose.”

“Mom.”

“Bye, dear!”

The end call tone only solidified Rose’s suspicions.

Chugging the remnants of her coffee, she strode towards the employee entrance.

At the first sight of Carhart and denim, she slung the paper cup with excellent aim.

“Derek!”

“Whoa, what the—”

“You called mom?!”

Her brother laughed, wiping coffee droplets from his beard and the bridge of his nose.

“Of course, I did,” Derek said, stooping to pick up her weaponized garbage. “She’d have found out anyway. And it’s better to come from me than Nancy at the drug store or Jimmy down at the station.”

Rose planted her hands on her hips. “’Cause you anticipated mom going to both of those places today in some bizarre errand scavenger hunt?”

Derek’s grin turned just shy of shit-eating. “Well…”

“I hate you,” Rose retorted, brushing past him towards the lobby. “You’re such a rat.”

He turned, work boots heavy on the wood floor as he followed her. “If she’d found out from someone other than family, she’d have gone ballistic. I was protecting you.”

“You were snitching. And I don’t care how much taller than me you are, I’ll still stomp you.”

Derek might have been upwards of six-three, but he knew Rose wasn’t bluffing. She’d perfected her right hook in fifth grade and wasn’t afraid to use it.

He had the medical records to prove it.

“Oh, c’mon,” Derek said, trailing behind her. “You know mom has a point. You’re letting some stranger stay here?”

Rose paused at the check in desk to scoop up the small stack of mail left for her.

“I run an inn, Derek,” she said without looking at him. “I let strangers stay here all the time.”

“You know what I mean,” he said, leaning over her shoulder. “This guy washes up on shore and you’re offering him room and board?”

“As opposed to tossing him back in at high tide? Yeah.”

Circling the corner of the desk, she made her way through the empty dining room and shoved open the kitchen door.

“Everly, please tell me there’s more coffee,” she said, knowing her best friend would be by the stove before she even saw her.

“Oh, you’re back,” Everly exclaimed, wiping her hands on her apron and abandoning the stock she was stirring.

“And woefully under caffeinated,” Rose said, already reaching for a mug and the coffee pot handle. Leaning her hip into the stainless-steel countertop, she added, “I see you and my brother have been extra chatty this morning.”

With her honey brown curls pulled up into a messy bun, Everly’s cherubic face would have given anyone the impression she was innocent of all things scandalous.

But the glint in her eye gave her away.

“In my defense, I thought that’s why he was here to begin with,” Everly said, gesturing towards Derek. “To make sure the heating was working properly in Room Ten for when our new guest arrives.”

“It is, by the way,” Derek said to Rose. “You’re welcome.”

She glared at him over her steaming coffee.

Picking up a cutting board piled high with diced vegetables, Everly said, “Okay, tell it all to me again. Start from the beginning.”

“Rose first started exhibiting signs of poor judgement at age three, when she picked the Pink Power Ranger over the clearly superior Blue one,” Derek said with a grin, casually propping himself against the cabinetry.

“Remember you’re in a room filled with very sharp cutlery,” Rose warned.

It only made him laugh.

“Go on, go on,” Everly urged. “He washed to shore during a storm?”

“There wasn’t a storm today,” Derek countered, looking to Rose.

Sighing, she said, “Yes, there was. It just didn’t last long.”

“And a wave pushed him onto the rocks?” Everly asked, returning to the boiling stock pot.

“More like delivered him via pile-driver,” she said. “And he didn’t have a scratch on him after.”

Derek scoffed. “This is starting to sound like one of Grampy’s fish tales.”

“Why are you still here?” Rose said over her shoulder.

“For the free food,” he answered plainly. “And to finish staining the banister.”

As if on cue, Everly snatched a mitt from the counter and opened the oven, removing a tray of banana chocolate chip muffins.

"Okay but Iris at the Cumberland Farms said he washed up naked," Everly said with a laugh. "That's not… He wasn't… *Was he*?"

Forget coffee—Derek's uncomfortable groan was exactly the fuel Rose needed.

Grinning, Rose nodded. "As the day he was born."

"Oh my." Everly blushed. "I bet that was a sight."

"You have *no* idea."

Straightening, Derek threw up his hands. "Okay, that's enough for me."

Facing him, Rose feigned a pout. "Aww, leaving so soon."

"You get your cruel streak from Granddad Cortwright," he told her, attempting to snag a hot muffin from the cooling tray.

Rose swatted his hand. "At least I didn't inherit his knuckle hair."

"Hey!" Pulling back, Derek frowned, inspecting himself as he turned to leave. "Everly, you're the only one I like around here."

She chuckled. "Come back for a meatloaf sandwich when you're done."

As the door swung closed, Rose turned to her friend. "Don't encourage him."

"He only butts in because he's protective of you," she said, stirring more ingredients into the soup pot. "We all are."

"Why is everyone so concerned about me when I'm the least chaotic member of my entire family?"

Everly shrugged. "Maybe that's why. You're the outlier."

"Well this outlier would very much like to change out of her running gear and get to work," she said, finishing her coffee and setting the cup in

the sink. “Thanks for covering for Lex this morning, by the way.”

“Of course. What are business partners for?” Sliding over, Everly blinked up at Rose expectantly. “So, just out of curiosity, this mystery man wouldn’t happen to be… attractive, would he?”

Rose gathered the stack of mail she’d brought with her and smiled tightly.

“Look at the time. Better hurry before the linen guy calls,” she said, already walking away.

Everly tossed a tea towel over her shoulder. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

* * * * * * *

Checking Water Guy out of the hospital was… a process.

Rose had assumed it would take a while—what with convincing everyone she wasn’t scared to take in an unnamed amnesiac—but she hadn’t thought about all the paperwork she had to help him sign and the prescriptions he’d need just in case.

She’d wondered if muscle memory would kick in once he held a pen, but all he did was stare at the ball point with fascination and simply scribble something that looked like a child’s drawing of a wave.

Not exactly the outcome she’d hoped for.

The nurses had all taken to him instantly, helping him find scrubs that would fit his large frame. One even retrieved a coat his size from the lost and found, commenting how the navy blue was ‘just his color’.

Rose hadn’t noticed how broad he was when he was prone and half drowned on the rocks. Even in his hospital bed he’d seemed relatively average.

But once he was ambulatory, it was *all* she noticed.

He was nearly as tall as her brother, at least six-two if she had to guess, and he had the shoulder to waist ratio of an Olympic swimmer.

As the primary doctor explained the medicines she was sending home with him, a uniformed deputy appeared in the doorway, holding a large camera.

“Sorry to interrupt, I was— Oh hey, Rose.”

Glancing up from the intimidating collection of pills lined up on the tray table, she offered a half-smile. “Oh, Jimmy, hey,” she said. “How’s it going?”

Nodding, he smoothed a hand over his light brown cropped haircut.

“Can’t complain. I’m actually here to take photos of John Doe,” he told her, holding up his Nikon. “Boss wants to get him in the database before the weekend.”

Rose nodded, gesturing for Jimmy to step in.

She’d known him since they were children, and while it was difficult at times to the take him seriously in uniform since she’d witnessed him pee off the top of the slide in first grade, it did make getting out of speeding tickets easier.

As Jimmy explained the process in rapid fire detail, handsome Water Guy stared at him like a lost deer in a spotlight.

Rose stepped forward. “He’s still getting his bearings,” she murmured to Jimmy. Turning to the other man, she said, “It’s just to help your family find you. They’ll take your picture and put it on fliers, so if anyone recognizes you, they can contact the police to let them know.”

He watched her intently, violet gaze flicking from her lips to her eyes, down to her hands as she motioned to the camera.

Finally, he nodded and smiled, allowing himself to be directed.

Standing in front of the nearest blank wall, his stare lingered on Rose.

The flash of the camera startled him, and he squeezed his eyes shut, shaking his head.

"Alright, and turn to the left," Jimmy said.

Looking to Rose, Water Guy waited for her instruction.

Pointing, she mouthed, *'That way.'*

He did as she told him, lips twitching with amusement.

"Any distinguishing birthmarks, scars, or tattoos?" Jimmy asked.

He furrowed his brows in confusion.

"He means on your skin," she said. "Do you have any scars or marks someone might remember on you?"

Shrugging, he lifted his shirt off his abdomen, staring down at himself.

The pose was reminiscent of something a gym-bro influencer might do for an Instagram post, displaying his toned abs and defined chest in excruciating detail.

But his lack of awareness softened any awkward tension as he twisted comically to see his obliques.

Rose covered her mouth, stifling a giggle.

"No scars, no birthmarks…" Jimmy commented, squinting at the ridgelines of the man's torso. "No freckles or moles. Huh. Alright. And no tattoos? Even on your legs?"

Water Guy shrugged again and bent at the waist, lifting his pants legs to his knees.

"Uh, I didn't see any tattoos when I found him, Jimmy," Rose said, hoping it would speed the process along. "No scars either."

Jimmy nodded. "Okay, well I just gotta get his prints and then we'll be all set."

East Cove’s sheriff department wasn’t exactly on the cutting edge of technology, which meant finger printing was done the old-fashioned way with ink pads and print cards from the seventies.

Good thing their amnesiac friend was enthralled by the task.

“Hopefully someone recognizes your picture,” Jimmy said, packing up his stuff. “Or if you’re in the system, it’s ‘cause you were military or a teacher, and not for any other reason.”

His mildly threatening tone emphasized that if this man was a criminal in his life previously, they’d find out.

Of course, Water Guy only smiled, waving enthusiastically as Jimmy left.

As a nurse arrived with a wheelchair, Rose collected everything the doctor had given them, slinging her purse over her shoulder, and followed them down the hallway.

Everyone they passed wished him well, saying their goodbyes and hopes for his full recovery like he’d been elected Mayor of the ICU during his two-day stint.

But his attention was only on Rose, looking over his shoulder every few moments to make sure she was still there.

By the time they made it to the elevators, she posted up at his right side to save his neck the crick he was sure to get if he kept turning like that.

She bit her cheek not to laugh at his reaction to automated doors.

Wheeling him out of the hospital entrance into the chilly morning air, the nurse smiled wistfully.

“We sure are going to miss you around here, John Doe,” she told him as she pushed the break lever down with the toe of her shoe. “Not everyone is as sweet about getting an IV as you were.”

Water Guy smiled up at her as she patted his shoulder.

Rose dug her keys out of her bag. “I’ll be right back with the car, okay?”

She only made it three steps away when she heard the security guard call out a hearty “See you around, Flounder,” and chuckle loudly.

“Flounder was the best friend, not—” Rose cut herself off. “Never mind. Doesn’t matter.”

When she returned, pulling her 4Runner under the hospital awning, a small crowd of colorful scrubs had gathered around.

“Jesus, did he bathe in catnip or something?” She muttered to herself before getting out.

Extricating him from the crowd of adoring fans was one thing.

Explaining the importance of seatbelts and staying in one place while a vehicle was moving was a different matter.

Two minutes after leaving the parking lot, Water Guy discovered the automatic windows.

Rose didn’t know if she should laugh or scream.

“Oh, wait, no that’s not—” Rose leaned over, grabbing him by the coat to pull him back inside.

He’d taken to sticking his head out like a dog, and each curve in the road was a mini-heart attack.

“We don’t want your brains getting splattered on the corner of a stop sign, so how about you just…”

She tugged again and he yielded, settling back into his seat with the widest grin plastered on his windblown face.

Before she could offer a choice of radio stations, he entertained himself by adjusting the air vents back and forth, back and forth.

“Well, at least you’re having fun,” she muttered.

Then he discovered the spare change in her cup holder.

“Just don’t eat it,” she told him. “My sister swallowed a quarter when she was two and you don’t want to know what they had to do to make sure it came out.”

Jangling the pennies and dimes in his hand, he watched her.

“So, I was thinking once we get you settled in your room, we could look through some lists of names,” she said. “The hospital had you as John Doe, but you don’t really look like a John to me, and I’d rather not keep calling you ‘Water Guy’ in my head, so…”

Her grip tightened on the wheel as worry jolted her.

Was that offensive? He’d been brutally ejected from the sea. He might not be so keen to joke about his situation.

He didn’t react.

His gaze lingered on her, tracing from her face to her clenched hands and back, as if searching for context to her change in body language.

“I swear I’m not usually this literal,” she blurted out. “‘Water Guy’ just sort of stuck.”

Slowing at a stop sign, she exhaled fully.

“I’m usually wittier too,” she muttered.

Checking both ways twice, she straightened in her seat.

“I think I’m just nervous,” she admitted, easing off the breaks. “Aren’t you nervous?”

Tilting his chin in thought, he shook his head.

“I guess I’ll be nervous enough for the both of us.”

Maybe she should have put up a better front, given she was now his only provider for shelter and care and—

A wide, warm palm covered her knuckles, and Rose jumped.

Violet eyes brimmed with empathy as he held her stare.

Squeezing her hand, he smiled softly, nodding once in assurance.

It would be okay. He wasn’t scared, so she shouldn’t be either.

Rose sucked in a deep breath.

“Thanks,” she said. “This is my first time taking in a mysterious stranger with amnesia, so I guess I’m struggling with the learning curve.”

He chuckled—another deep rumble from his chest—and released her hand.

“We’re almost there,” she said just to fill the silence. “I hope you like the Whittaker. I didn’t name it, it was already called that when I bought it, but I didn’t want to change it ‘cause that felt disrespectful. It was the Whittaker for two hundred years, far be it for me to think I could pick a better name, you know?”

Rose glanced over, struck by how captivated he was with every word she spoke.

“I’m just rambling,” she told him, making a turn. “I also don’t usually talk this much.”

Gesturing to his throat, he quirked up the corner of his mouth and shrugged.

Rose laughed. “You’re right. Not like I’m cutting you off.”

Houses visible out the car windows changed from picturesque colonials to more weathered beachfront homes.

“I guess you wouldn’t remember if you knew ASL before, huh?”

He furrowed his brow.

“Oh, um, American Sign Language,” she explained. “It’s a way deaf or non-verbal people can communicate with their hands.”

His expression morphed from confused to intrigued.

“Would you want to learn?”

Nodding enthusiastically, he smiled.

“Great,” she said. “I’ll do some research then. I’m sure there are videos online or maybe even a course we could take.”

Coming up to the coastal roadway, she opened her mouth to speak again but the words died on her tongue.

He stared at the ocean with soul-crushing intensity.

Ragged, raw emotion flooded his gaze, etching into his features until he was an anguished replica of the man she’d known him to be.

The atmosphere inside the 4Runner pulsed with a rhythm Rose couldn’t place, and the hairs on her arms stood up as if seconds away from a lightning strike.

Time stretched on as she navigated the narrow road, finally turning down the lane that brought them to the Whittaker and leaving the sea in her rearview.

He blinked, and the charged air dissipated.

Rose would have stared in shock if she hadn’t been driving and desperately trying to avoid crashing into the beach rose hedges.

Again.

Clearing her throat, she said brightly, “Here we are.”

Leaning comically forward, he stared up at the slate blue siding and white trim, craning his neck to see the weathervane up on the very top floor —An antique whale Rose had found at her favorite nautical thrift store in town.

Parking in the gravel lot, she quickly gathered her things and got out.

Halfway through explaining he could have access to the employee entrance when coming and going, she realized he wasn’t behind her.

Turning, she saw why.

Struggling with the seatbelt like a fox in a trap, he yanked, twisted, and grappled, all to no avail.

"Oh god," Rose exclaimed, rushing back to help. "Sorry, sorry."

Opening his door, she dove across him to press the red release button.

"I told you how to buckle in, but totally forgot to explain how to get out."

Smiling apologetically, Rose tucked a loose strand of red hair behind her ear.

It wasn't until his gleaming, interested gaze dropped that she even realized she'd planted her hand fully on his broad chest.

Heat flooded her face and she pulled away.

"Uh, so…" She straightened, narrowly avoiding concussing herself on the car door. "You can follow me."

Getting out of the car, he spun in a slow circle, taking in the surrounding houses, the maple trees that had lost their leaves months prior, the thick shrubs that would flower that spring, and the pathway leading between her tiny cottage and the inn.

"As I was saying, this is the Whittaker," Rose explained, pointing. "And back there, through those bushes, is where I live. It's the caretaker's cottage. Desperately in need of some fresh paint and new insulation but it's home."

He was right on her heels like a second shadow as she led him to the inn.

"This door is usually reserved for staff, but since you're not exactly *just* a guest, you can use it whenever you want," she said over her shoulder.

He nodded in understanding and Rose continued down the hall.

“Everly, we’re back,” she called as they approached the check in desk. “Everly is our chef, co-owner, and my best friend, since, like, forever,” she said to him, offering a smile. “I think you’ll like her.”

He listened intently as she pointed out the television in the lobby, the board games and books, and the other exits and entrances.

She didn’t comment on his aversion to the stuffed swordfish hanging over the fireplace, but she certainly noted it.

“Hello there,” Everly called, entering through the dining room. “It’s so nice to meet—”

As soon as he faced her, she faltered, nearly tripping on her own feet.

“You,” she choked out.

Beaming, he waved with great enthusiasm.

Biting her lip to keep from laughing, Rose gestured between the two. “Everly, this is… Well, we’re going to figure that out soon.”

Taking a few steps closer, Everly smiled. “Rose has told me so much about you. I mean, well, she’s told me everything she knew. Which, I guess is about as much as you know, huh?”

Just out of his eyeline, Rose stared at her and mouthed ‘*Really?’*

Shrugging, he nodded gently and quirked his lips in an endearing ‘I guess so’ expression.

“I’m going to show our new friend to Room Ten,” Rose said, striding behind the desk to retrieve a set of keys for him. “I’ll get him settled in and then maybe he could have something to eat?”

At the mention of cooking, Everly perked up with a sense of purpose.

“Oh, of course. I can make anything you’d like,” she said. “Pot roast and mashed potatoes, or chicken fettuccine alfredo, or—Oh, are you

vegetarian? I could make tofu stir fry or a nice winter green salad with goat cheese…"

His gaze darted between her lips and her fidgeting hands as she counted off the many dishes she could whip up.

Looking a bit lost, he turned to Rose.

"Uh, maybe just a grilled cheese and tomato soup for now, okay?" Rose told her. "You can wow him with your culinary skills later."

Adjusting her apron, Everly nodded. "Coming right up."

"C'mon," Rose said, jerking her chin towards the hallway they'd come through. "I'll show you to your room."

It was as comfortable and well furbished as the other suites, but because it didn't have a view of the water, it was rarely booked unless it was busy season. It had been Rose's room when she first bought the Whittaker and was still fixing up the cottage to a livable condition. Out of the way and without any neighbors on either side, it would hopefully be a nice refuge for the man who'd already been through a tremendous ordeal.

Not that he seemed particularly scarred by the experience.

Unlocking the door, she stepped in and flicked on the light.

"Here it is," she said. "The bathroom is right through there. There's plenty of fresh towels and wash cloths, and those little travel soaps. We can go to the store tomorrow to pick up more toiletries. Oh, and more clothes, since you only have what's on you…"

She trailed off at the thought of needing to buy him underwear, and immediately wished for the floor to swallow her whole.

He didn't notice.

He was too busy trying the light switch over and over again.

"Speaking of, I think my brother left a change of clothes here when we got snowed in back in December," she continued. "You're about his

height so most of it should fit. We'll also have to buy you shoes tomorrow," she added, looking down at the hospital issue slippers he wore.

He smiled as he faced her and nodded, but it seemed as though he was just agreeing because she made the suggestion.

"There are extra pillows and blankets in the closet over there," she said, moving in a short circle around the room. "The desk has stationary and pens if you… want to write something."

Rose remembered his squiggled, wave-like signature and huffed out an awkward laugh.

Stepping forward, he stared down at her, gaze darting from her eyes to her lips, searching for the source of her amusement.

"Oh, uh, nothing. I was just…" She gestured vaguely. "Anyway, that's the bed." She pointed at the plush queen-sized mattress. "It's more comfortable than a hospital cot. Not to brag."

He tracked her motion with his eyes but didn't move away.

Looking back to Rose, he watched her with curiosity and warmth, corner of his mouth curving up.

God, he was gorgeous. Did he even know how handsome he was or did that information get knocked out of his skull along with everything else?

Rose swallowed thickly.

"I'll, uh… just go grab those clothes for you," she said, ignoring the spike in her blood pressure.

When he started to follow her, she held up her hand.

"No, no, that's okay," she said. "I'll only be a minute. Make yourself at home. Roll around on the bed to break it in. I'll be right back."

Shutting the door behind her with a firm click, Rose took a deep breath.

Okay Rose, pull it together, she thought. *You cannot crush on an amnesiac with model good looks. I know we're naturally a bit masochistic, but that's taking it too far.*

From behind the door, she heard the bedsprings squeak rhythmically and her brain supplied the image of him *actually* rolling around on the bed like she'd told him to.

"Note to self, he takes things literally," she whispered to herself and pushed away from the doorframe.

* * * * * * *

With a stack of Derek's clothes in the crook of her arm, Rose made her way back down the path towards to the inn.

Passing the large privacy hedges, the distinct crunch of pea gravel under a shoe that wasn't hers brought her to a halt.

"Hold it right there," she said without turning.

A twig snapped.

Twisting around, Rose caught sight of the scarlet ponytail that matched her own between the shrubbery and sighed.

"Zoey, what are you doing?"

Like a teenage Jack in the Box, her younger sister popped up from behind the hedge.

"How did you see me?" Zoey groaned.

"I didn't. I heard you," Rose said with a smirk. "Got to think about those hard-soled shoes, kiddo."

"Don't call me that."

Closing the distance, Rose squinted at her. "What are you even doing out of school?"

"I wanted to see you."

"Liar."

Stooping to gather her discarded backpack, Zoey's hair caught in the brush, collecting a few dried leaves at the ends.

"Fine," she said as she straightened. "I wanted to see *him*."

"Oh, for god's sake…" Rose rolled her eyes. "This guy has been through enough already. He's not some side show act to be gawked at."

Stumbling out of the hedge, Zoey slung her stuff around like she was completely unfazed by the weight of all the textbooks she carried.

"A man washes up on the beach, and *my* sister is the one who finds him," she exclaimed. "That's already totally bizarre and absolutely something to brag about. But now he's staying here with you, and I can see him for myself? Please. I'm telling everyone I've ever met."

Rose plucked a leaf out of her sister's hair and tossed it on the ground.

"I swear, Zoey, if this ends up on one of those supernatural mystery podcasts you listen to…"

Zoey's features pinched, giving her away. "No, of course not."

"Did Derek teach you how to fib? 'Cause he did a terrible job." Rose turned, heading into the inn. "You look exactly like him when you lie."

Zoey let out an offended gasp. "I do not."

As decidedly the most precocious of the McCleary children, Zoey had many things going for her, including her intellect. But being the surprise third kid had its pitfalls as well.

Derek and Rose were nearly grown by the time Zoey had been born, leaving her a little behind in the sibling bonding experiences. Her brother and sister were more like additional parents than partners in crime, leaving her to devise her own schemes.

And to learn deception skills without much aid from the *better* con artist of the family.

“How did you even get here?” Rose asked over her shoulder. “There’s no way you walked all the way from school.”

“Mister Rossi gave me a ride,” Zoey said. “He says hi, by the way.”

“You hitched a ride with an eighty-year-old grocer with cataracts?” Rose shook her head. “You get your self-preservation instincts from Derek too.”

Passing Room Ten quickly, Rose headed for the check-in desk and pulled out the wooden stool for her sister to sit on.

“Okay, here’s the deal. You can meet the new guy, you can have lunch, and then you’re going right back to school. Got it?”

Zoey dropped her bag with a shuddering *thump.* “Got it.”

“Stay there,” Rose ordered. “And don’t touch anything important.”

“Can I borrow a pen?”

“Borrow, yes. Take, no.”

“Thank you,” Zoey sing-songed as Rose walked away.

She needed so much more coffee to deal with this day.

Pausing at the door to Room Ten, Rose steeled herself before knocking.

Again, she remembered he had no way of telling her to come in.

Geez, Rose, keep up.

“It’s me,” she announced, reaching for the knob. “I just wanted to drop these off…”

Poking her head in, she caught his bright, sunny smile as he jumped up from the corner of the bed.

“Oh, you didn’t have to—"

He swung the door open, ushering her in like she'd been gone a month.

Rose swallowed the impulse to call him a puppy.

"Here," she said, glancing down at the stack of denim and flannel. "You're a bit leaner than Derek so these might be kind of baggy but hopefully they'll be comfortable. And warmer than those scrubs."

Shucking his coat and placing it gently over the back of the desk chair, he grabbed his shirt by the hem and hauled it over his head.

Rose squeaked in a panic, averting her gaze from his bare, muscled abdomen.

"Oh, hold on," she said, pushing the clothes into his arms. "I'll give you some privacy to change."

He frowned, unsure why she was leaving so quickly.

"You know, 'cause you're… Well, we're…" Her cheeks burned. "It's just polite not to…" She waved a hand at him awkwardly and looked away. "I'll be in the lobby. Come on out when you're done."

Bumping into the side table as she made her exit, Rose cursed under her breath.

"I'm fine," she said, forcing another smile over her shoulder at him.

Concern mingled with curiosity as his stare shifted from her to the clothing in his hands.

She shut the door just as he unfolded the pair of jeans, and she knew what would happen after that.

Exhaling slowly, Rose collected herself as she returned to the front desk.

"Hey, are you coming to dinner this weekend?" Zoey asked, giving her a blessed distraction.

"Dinner?"

“At the house.” Zoey glanced up from whatever she was scribbling in her notebook. “Pasta night with Grampy. Derek’s bringing dessert.”

Rose picked up the stack of mail she’d already flipped through several times, needing something to do with her hands.

“Uh, maybe. We’ll see.”

“You should bring the new guy,” Zoey urged. “Mom wants to meet him anyway.”

“Mom wants to meet everyone,” Rose countered. “I told you I’ll see.”

“Fine,” Zoey drawled.

Setting down the pile of envelopes, Rose said, “Everly’s making grilled cheese and soup. You in?”

“Tomato?”

“Duh.”

“Okay, I’ll have some.”

Rose smirked. As if a growing fourteen-year-old would say no to free food.

The faint creak of a door opening made Rose’s pulse skip.

Soft padding of bare feet down the hall announced his approach and she heard more than saw Zoey put her pen down in preparation for the grand reveal.

Well, he’d *mostly* figured out the clothing situation…

He’d gotten the jeans on, and while the zipper was pulled up, he’d left the button at the top of his fly undone. Having forgone the grey Henley long sleeved shirt she’d brought him, he’d slipped the blue plaid flannel on, leaving it open to show his sculpted torso.

Zoey’s jaw audibly dropped. “Whoa.”

Stopping a couple feet in front of the desk, he splayed his hands and shrugged. Looking down at himself, he tugged at the sides of the flannel.

Blinking, Rose jolted into action.

“Oh, would you like help with those?” She asked, vaguely wondering if he didn’t remember how to fasten buttons.

“I can help,” Zoey cried, launching off the stool.

Grabbing her by the arm, Rose spun her back around. “I can manage alone, thank you very much.”

“Rude,” Zoey muttered, plopping down once more.

Hurrying to put herself between their new guest and prying, hormonal teen eyes, Rose gently urged him to face her.

Over her shoulder, he waved, beaming from ear to ear.

“Sorry, that’s my sister, Zoey,” Rose said to him, gathering the sides of the open shirt. “She decided to make an impromptu and illegal visit.”

“It isn’t illegal to skip school.”

Rose chuckled. “Clearly they haven’t taught you about truancy laws yet.”

“Is it true you don’t remember your name?” Zoey asked their new friend.

Rose hissed a warning at her, but he simply shook his head at her in response.

Leaning her elbows on the desk, Zoey said, “Wow, that’s a bummer.”

Rose snorted, and he glanced down at her with curiosity.

Fiddling with a stubborn button, she said, “Oh, just how she phrased that. It was a little… uncouth. But not incorrect.”

He grinned and turned his attention to where she was working with his shirt.

“Guess we’ll have to teach you how to do this, huh?”

He nodded, watching her hands move up the row as if she were casting a spell to keep his clothing together.

Leaving the two buttons at his collar undone just like her dad and brother preferred, Rose then remembered he needed his jeans fastened.

If she blushed any deeper people were going to think she was having a cardiac episode.

“Um, I can… I mean, is it okay if I…” She gestured towards his lower half.

Zoey’s giggle didn’t help matters.

Seemingly unaware of her embarrassment, he lifted the hem of his shirt to give her access.

He was going to need a belt if he wore these jeans again.

Tugging gently at the waistband, she tried not to gape at the deep V-cut disappearing beneath the denim.

“Lunch is rea—” Everly’s voice cut off behind her.

Rose looked over her shoulder as if she’d been caught shoplifting.

“—dy,” Everly finished, an impish grin spreading across her face. “Keeping busy out here, I see.”

“I was just…” Rose’s stare bounced between where her hands rested and Everly. “Helping out.”

Everly arched an eyebrow. “Clearly.”

“Rose said I could stay for lunch,” Zoey announced. Glancing over, she added, “I can’t wait to Snap my friends about this.”

Fastening the last button, Rose took a giant step back and tried three times to figure out what to do with her hands afterwards.

She settled for clutched tightly in front of her.

“Hungry?” She asked him.

Nodding, he waited for her to walk towards the kitchen first.

This is fine, she thought. *This is totally, completely fine.*

* * * * * * *

"What about Stephano?" Everly asked, ladling out soup into bowls.

Scrolling down the list on her phone, Zoey wrinkled her nose. "I don't know. It's a little much."

Turning, Everly handed Water Guy a spoon. "Do you like the name Stephano?"

He immediately looked to Rose, unsure of how to respond.

"How about we hear some other options," Rose said, plating the cut grilled cheese sandwiches.

"Ooh, what about something Irish?" Zoey asked, taking her bowl off the counter without looking up from the screen. "Like Seamus or Killian."

Rose hummed softly, glancing up at him.

"Killian," she repeated, observing him for a moment. "It's not bad."

The side of his mouth curled, but happiness didn't shine in his eyes.

He would agree to it if she urged, but he wasn't thrilled.

"How about something softer," Rose continued.

Leaning over, Everly whispered, "Sorry, *soft*? Have you seen him?"

Rose frowned. "He's not exactly a second-generation dock worker either. I mean, look at him. He's got the energy of a Golden Retriever."

The two women glanced over their shoulders in time to witness him lift the pepper grinder to his nose to sniff and immediately sneeze.

Everly nodded. "You're right. Never mind."

"What about something biblical?" Zoey said around a mouthful of grilled cheese.

"Like Isaac," Everly said. "Or Luke. John. Paul…"

"Adam," Rose murmured, barely aware she'd spoken.

Blinking, she faced him fully.

"What about Adam?"

There it was. The shining glimmer of excitement dancing in his violet eyes as he nodded.

"You like the name Adam?" Rose asked, wanting to be certain.

Tucking a loose strand of black hair behind his ear, he beamed, dimple forming on the left side of his face.

The name suited him—a man who emerged from nothingness but who was certainly not *nothing*.

Handing over a plate of grilled cheese sandwich halves, Rose smiled.

"Okay then. Everyone, meet Adam," she said.

Quickly, Zoey lifted her phone. "Hey, Adam. Smile!"

He turned, doing just that, and the shutter sound of her phone's camera went off.

"Perfect," she announced, already typing out a caption.

Rose started to scold her but stopped herself.

It might be helpful to have more photos circulating, so his family could find him.

If he had a family…

It was hard to imagine the man not having *anyone* in his life.

People who loved him with everything they had. People who would be going out of their minds with worry every passing moment he was gone.

Loved ones. Friends. Co-workers. People who enjoyed saying good morning to him as they passed on the street.

He meant something to someone. Probably a lot of someones.

But until they could find them, he seemed content to have lunch at the Whittaker's café and to be known as Adam.

Chapter Three

“Okay, I’ve ordered the replacement linen since the last shipment was, for whatever reason, lime green. I confirmed all our bookings for next week. I salted all the walkways and—" Rose tapped the end of her pen on her notepad and sighed. “Crap, I meant to call Rob about the gutters.”

“You can call him tomorrow,” Everly said, looking up from her produce orders.

“I know but with the snow coming, I wanted that leak taken care of before we get hit.”

Zoey kicked the bottom rung of the stool with the heel of her shoe. “I bet Derek could swing by,” she said. “I’ll text him.”

“Don’t text him,” Rose said. “I’m calling Rob.”

“Too late, he said he’s on his way.”

Facing her, Rose narrowed her stare. “Aren’t you supposed to be halfway back to school already?”

“It’s two forty-five,” Zoey told her. “By the time I got back, school would be out for the day.”

“How convenient for you. If you’re going to loiter, at least be useful and file these invoices for me.”

Handing over the stack of papers, she was surprised her sister didn’t whine.

“Okay,” she said, hopping off the stool and tucking her phone in her back pocket.

Shifting closer, Everly nudged Rose’s elbow and whispered, “Shouldn’t we, I don’t know, offer Adam something to do?”

She glanced from her friend to the man sitting on the lobby sofa with his hands in his lap. His gaze slowly moved across the room, assessing everything.

“He doesn’t work here, Everly. He’s a guest.”

“I know, but he looks bored.”

“I’m sure he’s fine.”

“He’s twiddling his thumbs. Literally.”

Rose sighed. “He’s probably just acclimating to everything.”

“He looks acclimated to me…”

“Well, if you want to ask if he’d like something to do, you can, but __”

Everly nearly shoved Rose over on her way around the desk.

“Adam?” She called, adjusting her apron strings. “Would you like to help me make cookies for tonight’s dessert menu?”

Straightening, Adam nodded eagerly.

“Great,” Everly said, smiling. “Come with me.”

Waving him over, she waited for him to stand before turning to lead him back to the kitchen.

Expectantly, he looked to Rose as he strode by.

“Don’t worry, ‘cookies’ isn’t a euphemism,” she said before she could catch herself.

The joke was totally lost on Adam, but Zoey let out a startled laugh behind her.

“Ew, Rose,” she muttered, still giggling.

“Oh please, Derek is so much worse than me.”

As a few guests wandered down from their rooms, asking about what activities East Cove had to offer and the mealtimes at the Whittaker, Rose was able to focus on her job for all of fifteen minutes.

Until Derek strolled through the employee entrance with the absurd amount of confidence belonging only to an eldest sibling.

Finishing with the retired couple from Boise, Rose politely excused herself and hustled to follow her brother.

“Where do you think you’re going?” She hissed, grabbing him by the arm and yanking him back.

“To fix your leaky gutter,” he countered.

“Since when are my gutters in the kitchen?”

Derek shrugged, Carhart jacket bunching around his shoulders. “I don’t know, you’re the one who bought this wacky old inn—”

“Cut it out, Derek,” Rose snapped, forcing him around to face her. “Zoey told you he’s back there, didn’t she?”

“She knew I wanted to meet this guy, so…”

“Meet or interrogate?”

He shoved his hands in his pockets. “I don’t think a subtle warning not to act out of turn counts as an interrogation.”

“You’re right, it doesn’t. That bumps it up to *threatening* him, which I also won’t allow.”

“Come on, Rose,” he said. “What else are brothers supposed to do?”

Before she could snatch his coat sleeve to stop him, Derek was turning on his heels and booking it for the kitchen door.

“Derek, I’m serious. This isn’t funny, he’s not—”

Following him into the kitchen, they both pulled up short at the sight before them.

“Trouble,” Rose finished.

With Everly at his side, and thoroughly amused, Adam leaned over the standing mixer, adding handfuls of ingredients and watching them spin into the dough.

Flour smudged his cheeks and the bridge of his nose, creasing with every smile.

Noticing them enter, Adam beamed at Rose and pointed to the mixer.

“He loves this thing,” Everly told them, giggling. “I told him to just wait until we make frosting for the cupcakes. He’s going to flip.”

Derek gaped and Rose took advantage of his silence.

“Adam, this is my brother, Derek” she said, clapping him on the shoulder. “He’s very shy and not that talkative and won’t be asking you any awkward, intrusive, personal questions.”

Everly laughed. “He won’t?”

“Hey, that’s not…” Derek furrowed his brow. “Is he wearing my shirt?”

Grabbing something from the counter, Adam hurried towards them, practically shoving it in Rose’s face.

Oh. Chocolate chips.

Pouring a handful from the bag, he held them out to her with urgency.

“Yeah, they’re…” She looked up at him. “I’m guessing you don’t remember eating chocolate chips before now, huh?”

Adam shook his head and offered the chocolate to her once more.

Taking a few, Rose popped them into her mouth and smiled as she chewed. “Delicious.”

Adam’s grin threatened to break his face in half.

Taking a breath, Derek stepped forward, extending his hand in greeting. “Hey, I’m—”

Turning sharply, Adam offered him chocolate chips as well.

“Uh…” Derek stared for a moment. “Thanks.” He said, taking a few off the top, much to Adam’s delight.

Rose was wrong.

Having Derek meet Adam this way was possibly the best case scenario.

"So, your name's Adam, huh?" Derek asked. "Guess you remembered something along the way."

Adam shook his head, motioning to Rose before pointing to his own chest.

Derek scowled. "Sorry, I don't… Do you mean… She…?"

Repeating the gesture, Adam bobbed his head.

"Why won't he just tell me?" Derek stage-whispered to Rose.

Smacking him in the arm, she glared up at him. "He can't, Derek. He doesn't speak."

Aghast, Derek turned to Adam. "Oh, man, I'm sorry. I didn't realize…"

Expression open and free of concern, Adam shrugged, tossing a few chocolate pieces into his mouth.

Leaning towards her, Derek deadpanned, "Clearly I've offended him greatly."

"Don't talk *about* him, he's right in front of you."

"Sorry," Derek muttered. Straightening, he continued. "So, Adam, is it? How are you liking it here so far?"

Adam smiled brightly. Offering Rose more chocolate, he nodded, strands of black hair falling from his loose ponytail.

"Well, good, I'm glad you're…" Derek watched the two of them share food with an arched eyebrow. "Comfortable."

"Adam, I'm going to start the second batch," Everly called. "Want to help?"

Spinning, Adam gleefully rushed back to the mixer.

“So that’s the guy,” Derek murmured, watching the other man. “An amnesiac who can’t speak and survived a freak storm. Kind of sounds like __”

“Don’t say it.”

“A fish tale.”

Rose groaned. “I’m going to petition dad to limit your time at Grampy’s boatyard.”

“As if that motion would pass,” Derek scoffed.

“It’s not a fish tale, Derek,” she argued. “It sounds like a nightmare. Imagine not being able to remember anything about yourself or your life before, and then having to relearn even the most basic of things.”

Derek’s stare bounced from her to Adam, who was dumping a bowlful of walnuts into the batter and grinning.

“Oh yeah, he looks tortured alright.”

“Stop it,” Rose said, poking him in the side. “Has this satisfied your curiosity enough to leave him be?”

“Not even remotely,” Derek said. “But if I’m going fix your gutter while there’s still light out, I better get to it. Consider all of this—” He moved his hand in a loose oval. “—Put on pause until further notice.”

“Oh goodie.”

As Derek started to leave, he turned back. “You’re bringing him to dinner this weekend, right?”

“I don’t even know if *I’m* going to dinner this weekend,” she said. “So why would I—”

“Hey, Adam,” Derek called past her. “You want to come to our parents’ place for dinner on Saturday?”

With raised eyebrows, Adam glanced up from the mixer. Looking from Derek to Rose and back, he nodded happily.

“Great, glad that’s settled,” Derek said, smirking as he pushed the door open.

Rose followed him out, teeth on edge.

“Between you and Zoey, I’m losing all of my autonomy here.”

“You and I both know you’d never miss pasta night.”

“Excuse me, my emotional attachment to carbs ended in high school.”

“That’s debatable,” he said. “You know mom would just find a reason to come over if you didn’t show up anyway, so might as well get some good food out of it.”

Inhaling until her lungs hurt, Rose puffed her cheeks out.

“Fine,” she said on the exhale. “But I’m not going to force Adam to come if he doesn’t want to.”

“Something tells me he’ll be more than happy to join in,” Derek said with a knowing wink over his shoulder that made Rose skid to a halt in the hallway.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” She asked as Derek headed for the side door.

“Huh?”

“Derek, what did you mean?”

He held his hand up to his ear. “I can’t hear you, sorry.”

“Der—” She cut herself off. He was out of the inn before she could finish.

If she was ever diagnosed with hypertension, the cause would be her family.

Brushing her hair off her forehead, Rose turned, colliding with something solid.

"*Oof!* God, what—" Looking up, she realized it wasn't something, but some*one*. "Oh!"

Adam steadied her with one hand, holding onto her arm.

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize you were behind me," she said, heat rising on her neck.

Adam only smiled. Releasing her, he held out his other hand to offer a new snack.

Pecans.

"Good to know you're not allergic," she said with a soft laugh.

Staring down at her with glittering violet eyes, he didn't move until she took some for herself.

"Thanks, Adam."

* * * * * * *

After a full afternoon of learning how to bake, dice vegetables, and the ins and outs of oven safety, Adam was clearly in need of a nap.

His shoulders slumped ever so slightly, and faint shadows curved beneath his eyes, but his spirits never fell. He approached everything with curiosity and a nearly omnipresent smile.

He didn't even seem to mind Zoey recording him every few seconds, making her own commentary as he helped roll pie crusts or place cookies on baking sheets.

Rose, however, was ready to throw her sister's phone in the garbage disposal.

Before it came to that, Derek returned, announcing he had fixed her gutter and telling Zoey he was driving her home in two minutes.

In a flurry of movement and chatter, her siblings made their exit, leaving a wake of jarring stillness.

Taking advantage of the silence, Rose returned to the front desk to finish payroll, turning the lobby TV on to the local news station for a weather update.

“Anywhere from three to five inches of snow,” the overly coiffed meteorologist said into the camera, pointing to the greenscreen map of the Massachusetts coastline.

Rose made a mental note to grab extra snow shovels out of the closet, just to be safe.

As she finished signing the last check, the back of her neck tingled, and she froze.

She was being watched.

No one was in the lobby.

No one on the stairs or by the door.

Slowly, she turned to look behind her.

Perched on the wooden stool a foot away, Adam sat, observing her intently.

“Jesus Christ,” Rose gasped, dropping her pen.

Realizing his mistake, he winced, lifting his hand in a cautious wave.

“How is a guy as big as you this freaking quiet?” Rose said, willing her pulse to even out.

Glancing down at his hospital issue slippers, she added, “Well that probably helps a bit.”

He followed her gaze with his but didn’t react much except to wiggle his toes inside the flimsy material.

Stuffing the check she’d written into an envelope, she asked, “Did Everly overwhelm you with recipes?” Rose paused to lick the flap before

continuing. “It’s okay. Trust me, I get it. Once she starts talking about emulsion techniques and proper stock to water ratios, I check out too.”

Adam leaned forward, propping his elbows on his knees, observing her speak and multitask with intrigue.

“Are you getting tired?” Rose asked, counting the number of envelopes in the stack on the desk. “Don’t feel like you have to tough it out. You can rest in your room if you’d like.”

Lips twitching, he shook his head gently.

“Okay,” she said. “I’m afraid none of this is as exciting as mixing cookie batter or chopping carrots. You might get bored up here with me.”

Again, he shook his head.

“Well, don’t say I didn’t warn you,” she joked. “Next up: monthly budgeting.”

Shifting his weight, Adam’s keen gaze leveled on her, pleasant expression softening his angular features. Everywhere he looked, warmth bloomed across her skin.

The jaded, aching part of her she didn’t like to admit still dwelled in the back of her mind was eager to sneer. No one *wanted* to watch her work. Watch her move frenetically and ungracefully through her small corner of the world.

He was just lonely. She was someone to keep him company. That’s all.

Taking a deep breath, Rose forced her attention back to her notes and the Excel spreadsheet open on the desktop.

Every so often, she would sneak a glance at him, bracing for the dull grimace of a man without anything better to do.

But each time Adam’s ocean-violet gaze would flick up to meet hers, a soft smile curving his lips.

Attentive and curious, he tracked every movement, every keystroke, noted every muttered word she said to herself.

It was as if he was reteaching himself about the world by studying the way his new companions did things.

Distracted by the feeling of his stare on her, Rose flipped an invoice page too quickly and sliced the tip of her finger.

“Shit,” she hissed, blood welling up from the paper cut.

Adam was at her side before she could blink.

Clutching her gently by the arms, he turned her to face him. Warm, smooth hands clasped her wrist, gently tugging so he could inspect her hand.

“Oh, uh, it’s okay,” she said. “It’s just a…”

Adam scowled at the dripping red line marring her skin. His brows knit together so deeply his forehead creased.

She realized it was the first time since they’d met that she’d ever seen him frown like that.

With a feather-light touch, he stroked the wound with his thumb, wiping the blood away.

Rose swallowed thickly.

“A papercut,” she finished, voice faint.

He didn’t release her. Fingers tracing aimless patterns along her wrist, he continued to soothe her discomfort.

“I’m okay, Adam. It was an accident,” she told him, just to put his mind at ease. “Just part of being human, I guess.”

For the span of three heartbeats, a bone deep uncertainty swirled in his gaze, unable to anchor to anything.

Before she could think of something to say, he blinked, and the expression disappeared like the shadow of a shark in the waves.

He traced her cut a final time before gently letting go.

Rose ignored the ache behind her sternum as their hands drifted apart.

Digging a Band-Aid out of the first aid kit behind the desk, she showed him the process of wrapping up her finger and tossing the paper strips into the trash.

“See?” She said, holding up her bandaged appendage. “All better.”

Flashing a tender smile, Adam nodded once and took his seat again, settling in to continue watching her work.

It wasn’t until that night—after Lex the night clerk arrived, after dinner at the inn was over and the dining room was closed, after Adam went to his room to finally get some rest and Rose was back in her cottage and washing up for bed—that she realized something was off.

No, *missing*.

Peeling the wilted bandage off her index finger, she stared at her hand in the bright light of her bathroom.

Twisting it, pinching the digit, holding it under cold water, Rose waited for the sting of a papercut.

It never came.

In fact, she hadn’t felt the ache all night.

Because her cut was already healed.

* * * * * * *

Settling against the pillows, he stared up at the ceiling of his new room in the dark and smiled.

He liked it here.

Maybe he shouldn’t—it wasn’t the home he came from, according to everyone who explained his situation to him—but he did.

He didn’t remember his first home, so why couldn’t he enjoy being in this new place, with people who cared for him?

Rose cared for him.

Rose saved him, offered him shelter, fed him, treated him with kindness and respect.

It warmed his blood in strange and wonderful ways.

He could only hope to repay her, or at the very least, fully communicate how much it meant to him.

How much *she* meant to him.

Stretching his legs, he thought it odd how sore they were. Perhaps standing so much after his accident had taxed his body more than he’d anticipated.

He felt strong otherwise. His arms clearly able to carry heavy weight, his back straight, and his torso firm.

Had his legs been injured before then? Had they been unused in contrast to the rest of him?

Lifting his head, he glanced down the length of his body and wiggled his bare toes.

He didn’t seem injured or unused.

But when he tried to remember anything about his life prior to the day Rose found him on the rocks…

Inky, swirling nothingness.

His mind wasn’t exactly vacant, but whatever dwelled there was completely out of reach.

All that came to him was cold.

Cold, dark, and briny.

Like the water he’d coughed up just before laying eyes on fiery red hair and the most beautiful face he was certain he’d ever seen, with or

without his memories.

Rose was his first memory now.

And nothing about that upset him at all.

Chapter Four

Waking before her alarm, Rose sighed as she stared at the dark ceiling.

On any other day, she'd dress for a run, but she hadn't heard the snowplows yet, and the last thing she needed was to slip on ice and fall in a slush pile.

Again.

Taking a few minutes to scroll on her phone, checking social media for herself and the Whittaker, she replied to DMs and comments until her notifications were cleared out.

Rustling outside, just past her hedges, caught her attention.

It was too loud for a bird, but they struggled to keep raccoons out of their garbage since the day they opened, no matter what the weather was like.

Hoisting herself out of bed, she wrapped her arms around her torso, shivering as she wandered to the picture window with the clear view of the path to the inn.

Well, it definitely wasn't a raccoon.

"Crap, crap, crap," she said, rushing to grab warmer clothes to change into.

Stomping her feet into snow boots and zipping up her coat, she hurried out into the wintery scene, closing her cottage door behind her.

The sky was a velvet lavender—refracted and reflected light bouncing off the snow globe world surrounding them.

"Adam?" She said, careful to keep her voice down. "What are you doing out here?"

Standing next to the frozen bird bath, Adam held his bare hands out, catching the last of the drifting snowflakes.

His smile was warm enough to melt the icicles forming on the downspouts.

Rose would've been charmed by the sight if he was properly dressed. In his borrowed jeans and grey Henley, he'd forgone the extra layer of the flannel for God only knew what reason.

"Adam, you're going to freeze," she said, trudging towards him. "You don't have a coat or—oh no, you're not even wearing shoes. You're going to get frostbite and lose a toe."

Ignoring her worry, Adam took her hand and stretched her arm out towards the sky.

"We have to get you inside," she said, letting herself be posed. "How long have you been out here?"

He didn't make an expression like he could or wanted to answer.

He was too preoccupied with helping her catch snowflakes.

Staring up at him, she inhaled deeply.

He was *so* happy. Standing there half-dressed in the cold, watching frozen water collect in their hands, he radiated joy from every molecule in his body.

Rose couldn't remember the last time she'd been delighted by something that simple.

"You've never seen snow, have you?"

She'd meant to ask if he *remembered* snow, but she didn't correct herself.

Adam shook his head, smiling down at her as his hand wrapped around the back of hers.

Clumps of white collected in his black hair and caught in his eyebrows and dark lashes. Wet spots formed on his shirt. The cuffs of his jeans dampened the longer he stood in one place.

And yet, he never shivered.

Just as Rose opened her mouth to speak, Adam reached for her face, and she halted.

Gently swiping along the curve of her cheek, Adam brought his finger up for her to see the rapidly melting snowflake that had fallen below her eye.

Rose's throat tightened.

She'd never been around anyone so entirely present, the embodiment of wonder.

Was he always like this? She thought, smiling as he stuck his tongue out to catch more snow. *Always this… joyful?*

Despite the beauty of his innocence, she still didn't want him losing a digit…

"Come on," she said, taking his hand. "Let's get you inside and warmed up. We'll go to the store today and get you proper clothes, and then you can stay out here and play in the snow all day if you want."

His eyebrows shot up in a 'really?' expression that had her coughing on a laugh.

"Okay, well maybe not *all* day. It's not getting above thirty degrees today."

Leading him back to the inn, she paused in the doorway to shake off her coat and boots before helping Adam brush the snow from his shoulders.

They strode towards the front desk, surprising the night clerk.

"You're in early," Lex said, smiling as they set aside their crossword.

"Couldn't sleep," she admitted. "And apparently neither could he," she added, glancing over her shoulder.

Adam waved happily, wiping the front of his shirt.

“I’m just going to make some coffee to help thaw us out,” Rose said. “And then you can take off.”

Lex nodded, their short, silver hair catching the light. “No problem.”

Rose ignored the interested, lingering stare Lex gave Adam as he tugged at his borrowed clothes, flashing an inch of his toned abdomen.

Honestly, she couldn’t blame them. If she wasn’t too cold to think properly, she’d be doing something similar.

Gesturing for Adam to follow her, Rose crossed the dining room, entering the dark, quiet kitchen. Flicking on the first stretch of recessed lighting, she got to work filling the carafe with water and pulling out the can of ground coffee.

She felt Adam’s gaze on her with every movement she made.

“I figured we’d go downtown today and get you some clothes that actually fit,” she said, needing to fill the silence. “There are a couple stores that should still have winter wear, and I know the sporting gear place will have snow boots in stock.”

Scooping grounds into the paper filter, she glanced over her shoulder.

“I’d say we could also head to the Target in Danvers to stock up on toiletries, but after a snowstorm it’ll be a shitshow and no one needs that right now.”

Adam smiled despite most likely not understanding half of what she said.

Hitting the brew button, Rose turned. “How are those toes doing?”

Smirking, he glanced down at his bare feet, partially curling the digits against the tile.

“All still present, I see,” she said.

The back door to the kitchen swung open on creaking hinges as Everly half-tumbled inside, wrapped in multiple scarves and carrying a crate of butternut squashes.

"Jesus H," Rose started, reaching out to help her.

"I'm okay," Everly exclaimed, voice muffled behind the colorful striped knitwear. "Just slipped on a little ice, that's all."

Setting down the produce and her bag, she began the unraveling process.

"What are you doing here so early?"

Rose hovered, hands outstretched just to be safe. "I was going to ask you the same thing."

"I wanted to get a jump on baking," Everly said, hanging her puffy coat on the hook by the door. "We sold out of everything yesterday—I mean, *everything*. All the cookies we made, all the pies, even the loaves of bread for dinner. People were begging for more." Grinning at Adam, she added, "You must have the magic touch, my friend."

The tip of Rose's finger tingled as if in response.

Magic.

Right.

Sure.

"In fact, you want to help me prep for today?" Everly continued, pulling her apron over her neck and rolling the sleeves of her thick cable knit sweater to her elbows. "We can make Oopsies again."

"Sorry, what?" Rose frowned.

"Adam accidentally put chocolate into the snickerdoodle batter," Everly said with a chuckle. "But they turned out pretty great, so I called them Oopsies and stuck 'em on the dessert menu. Sold out in an hour."

Rose smirked. “Looks like we’ll be turning a profit on dinner this month after all.”

“How about I fix us some breakfast and then we can get started?” Everly asked, already warming a skillet.

“Sure, but I’ll have to take your apprentice back for the afternoon,” she said. “He’s in desperate need of clothing that didn’t once belong to my brother.”

Adam stared down at himself, tugging at the hem of his shirt.

“Not that they don’t look good,” she added quickly. “Or, you know, that you’re… I just meant… ‘Cause you’re so much taller and…” She swallowed. “Leaner.”

Everly arched her eyebrow at Rose, just out of Adam’s line of vision.

“So…” Rose cleared her throat. “Who wants coffee?”

Turning, she quickly gathered three mugs from the cabinet and poured.

She felt him at her side before she saw him.

Lifting the closest cup to his nose, Adam sniffed it before taking a huge gulp and promptly grimacing.

Rose choked on a laugh.

“Too hot?” She asked. “Too bitter?”

Adam bobbed his head, eyes pinched shut.

“Both. Got it. Here.” She offered the sugar canister with one hand and the creamer with the other. “Some people prefer their coffee a little lighter and sweeter. Try this.”

Eyeing the cylinder of white granules, Adam took it and upended it over his cup.

He paused, sniffed the coffee once more, and repeated the process.

“It definitely won’t be bitter now,” Rose chuckled.

When he was satisfied, he switched to cream, adding barely a thimble’s worth into his mug.

“What do you think about omelets?” Everly asked, shuffling items around in the refrigerator. “Or French toast and bacon? Ooooh or I could make chicken and waffles.”

Cupping his hands around his mug, Adam blinked owlishly at her.

Rose leaned back against the counter, sipping her black coffee. “Maybe just scrambled eggs and toast.”

“And some fruit,” Everly added, pointing at her with a carton of blueberries.

Rose sighed. “Please tell me you didn’t go on Web MD again.”

“I’m telling you, you had several symptoms of scurvy last week. And a vitamin D deficiency—”

“It’s winter, everyone is deficient in Vitamin D.”

“*And* iron deficiency, high blood pressure, calcium loss—”

“Careful Everly, you’re going to put Doctor Jefferson out of business.”

As she turned to leave the kitchen, Everly stepped in front of her, partially blocking her with a plastic bottle of orange juice.

“Are you serious?”

“Just humor me,” Everly urged.

Rose took it. Reluctantly.

“You’re just as bad as my mother,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“You and I both know your mother wouldn’t be this polite about it.”

Sidestepping her friend, Rose made a second attempt to leave, coffee and OJ in hand and Adam right behind her.

The kitchen door swung wide, narrowly missing her chin.

“Good morning,” Zoey exclaimed, arms spread out.

“Oh come on,” Rose said, scowling. “Zoey, it’s six-thirteen in the morning.”

“I know, but I left my notebook here yesterday, so I had to come back to get it,” she said, dropping her backpack unceremoniously by the dishware hutch. Grinning, she leaned around Rose and waved. “Morning, Adam.”

The air shifted by Rose’s right ear as he waved back.

“Who did you manage to trick into giving you a ride this time?” She asked, setting her coffee and juice down on the counter.

She knew better than to believe she’d be leaving the kitchen any time soon.

“Dad’s outside,” Zoey told her, snagging a to-go cup and filling it with iced tea from the fridge. “He has an early meeting, so he’s taking me to school.”

“He’s outside? In the Bronco?” Rose asked, opening the pantry to retrieve a sleeve of bagels. “And he’s not coming in?”

“I said he’s outside,” Zoey replied. “I didn’t say he was in the Bronco…”

Dropping two slices into the toaster, she pushed down the lever and crossed her arms, waiting for her sister to explain.

“He’s shoveling your driveway,” Zoey finally admitted, sipping her drink.

“Why?” Rose groaned. “He knows I can do it.”

“He’s just helping.”

“He’s going to tweak his back again like last month.”

Crossing the room, she lifted onto her tiptoes to peer out the window above the sink that overlooked the end of the lane.

There he was. Her gentle giant of a father, decked out in business casual slacks and a heavy overcoat, scraping snow off the Whittaker's paved drive.

"That's not my shovel," Rose commented, squinting at the foreign bright yellow handle. "Did dad bring a shovel from home?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny," Zoey said as the toaster popped.

Stepping back over to the counter, Rose grabbed a paper cup and lid and filled it with coffee and a splash of cream.

"Take this out for dad when you leave, okay?" She told her sister without looking up. "And be sure he takes two Advil from the bottle in his glovebox so his back doesn't seize up on him."

When she turned around, Zoey was in the middle of snapping a selfie with Adam, grinning as she held up her bagel to keep it in frame.

Rose planted her hand on her hip. "Really?"

Zoey changed the camera angle and took a few more.

"I asked if he minded and he shook his head," she explained when they finished.

Looking to Adam for confirmation, all he did was grin and sip his coffee flavored sugar.

"Just try to be a little less eager to plaster him all over Instagram, okay?" Rose said, lowering her voice. "When he remembers more, he might not be so keen."

"*If* he remembers," Zoey countered.

"Pessimism is for adults. Now take your free breakfast and your notebook and go to school."

"Can't I have some jelly? Or cinnamon butter?"

Rose pointed to the door in silence.

"Fine," Zoey groaned.

Shoving her bagel in her mouth, she collected her things, and the coffee for their dad, and trudged towards the exit.

“See you tomorrow, Adam,” she called, words garbled by the food between her teeth.

Shit, it’s Friday already? Rose was certain her internal clock had run out of batteries.

“Bye, Everly,” Zoey added as the door swung shut.

“Bye, sweetie!”

Rose took a deep breath, releasing it on a long sigh.

“Everly, you’re right,” she started. “Maybe I am coming down with a vitamin deficiency, blood pressure, scurvy combo. In fact, I think I’m going to be feeling extra terrible tomorrow by midday.”

As Everly laughed, Adam frowned deeply at her, concern welling in his violet eyes as he stepped closer.

Shaking her head, she waved him off. “It was a joke. I promise.”

Though if it got her out of an overbearing interrogation masquerading as a fun family dinner, she wasn’t opposed to making it a reality.

For Adam’s sake, she kept that last part to herself.

* * * * * * *

In small towns everything ran slowly except the gossip mill.

And East Cove’s gossip mill had been on overdrive since the day Adam washed up on shore.

Rose hadn’t realized just how curious the townsfolk had become, but after the fifth time of being stopped ‘just to catch up,’ it was painfully obvious the Rusty Anchor needed to re-up their extended cable package for their bar TVs and give people some more entertainment.

Wandering up Main Street, she read over the to-do list on her phone again.

“Okay, we got you shoes and a decent coat,” she said, mostly to herself but she knew Adam was listening. “Next we’ll pick you out some more clothes. If we’re lucky, the menswear place will have a few of those warm cable knit sweaters, and a few pull over fleece—”

She sensed his absence and halted in the middle of the sidewalk.

“Adam?”

Turning, she discovered what ensnared him and grit her teeth.

Ms. Baldwin, East Cove’s premier chocolatier and most brazen flirt, had lured Adam to her shop door with a heaping tray of assorted truffles.

“Oh geez…” Rose muttered, backtracking quickly.

“Goodness, you really are a fine specimen, aren’t you?” Ms. Baldwin drawled, straightening the lapel of Adam’s flannel shirt and patting his chest.

Chewing a mouthful of chocolate, Adam shrugged, blissfully unaware of her advance.

“Good morning, Ms. Baldwin,” Rose said, getting to his side in record time. “Already busy, I see.”

“I was just introducing myself to our town’s mysterious new member,” she said, voice sickly sweet. Smoothing the side of her bleach blonde bob, she added, “I heard he was handsome, but with a face like that, he belongs on the cover of a magazine.”

Glancing up at Adam, Rose expected to see some change in his expression.

Instead, he gathered another large handful of truffles and stuffed them in his mouth.

“Yeah, he sure did win the genetic lottery,” Rose said flatly. “Well, thank you for the free samples, but we really must be—”

“Oh, let him stay a minute,” Ms. Baldwin countered, jutting her hip out. “He seems to enjoy my treats.”

Rose fought the urge to gag.

“I’ve heard a lot of people in town have enjoyed them at one time or another,” she said primly. “Including most of the Elks club, which must be great for business, and certainly seems more age appropriate for you, given the sophistication of your… *treats*.”

The withering glare Ms. Baldwin gave her could’ve laid out a moose, but Rose’s constitution was stronger.

Yanking her tray back, startling Adam, she adjusted the collar of her white button down.

“You are just like your mother,” she hissed.

Rose smiled. “Why thank you. I love when people notice our family resemblance.”

Taking Adam by the crook of the arm, she led him away.

Completely oblivious, Adam twisted around to wave goodbye and shove more chocolate into his chipmunk cheeks.

“I’m convinced that woman has an ego complex,” Rose muttered, hauling him with her at a brisk pace until they were out of Ms. Baldwin’s striking range. “And her candy is way overpriced.”

Rounding the corner, she realized she still had her arm looped with his and flushed.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to… I know you’re an adult, I don’t have to guide you around. I just—”

Rose was cut off by a giant chocolate truffle being shoved under her nose.

“Oh, no, that’s okay…”

Adam’s bright, eager gaze met hers and he nodded at her to take it.

Well, she couldn’t say no to *free* overpriced chocolate.

“Alright, but only because you offered.”

The delight in his eyes was almost enough to make her forgive Ms. Baldwin’s predatory inclinations.

Almost.

Two hours and several store visits later, they had a closet worth of clothing, enough toiletries to cover the bathroom vanity, and Rose had a splitting headache.

But not because of Adam.

Keeping her cellphone pinned to her ear with her shoulder, she shoved their bags into the back of her 4Runner.

“Mom, now really isn’t a good time—”

“I just wanted to ask about the menu for tomorrow,” her mother said. “Since we’ll have a guest.”

Rose sighed. “I already told Derek and Zoey that I’m not going to force Adam to come to our crazy hectic family dinner if he doesn’t want to.”

As her mom rambled in her ear, Rose felt a tap on her other shoulder and turned.

Adam shook his head, eyebrows arched in a gently disagreeing way.

He motioned with the hand that wasn’t holding shoe boxes—first at himself and then at Rose and her phone.

Angling the speaker away, she whispered, “Trust me, I’m doing you a favor.”

He shook his head once more.

“You might be tired or feeling like you need alone time or—” Her mother’s voice called her attention back. “Yeah, mom, I’m still here. How would I know if he has a shellfish allergy?”

Adam nudged her again, gesturing as best as he could. He was insistent—he wanted to come to dinner.

“I’m still not forcing you,” she said to him. “And you have the right to change your mind at any moment.”

Adam smirked and stepped forward to put the boxes in the car, leaning across her so closely she could feel his body heat.

The tinny voice of her mother cracked in her ear. “Is he saying anything about the seafood linguine?”

Rose shut the hatch a little too hard. “Mom, he can’t *say* anything. Remember?”

“Shit. Right, of course,” she muttered. “Well, does he at least seem interested?”

Biting the inside of her bottom lip to keep from screaming, she closed her eyes for a moment.

“Adam? Are you adverse to having seafood in your pasta tomorrow?”

Thinking it over, he eventually shrugged and shook his head.

“That sounds great, mom,” she forced out in an even tone. “Talk to you later.”

“Oh, but one more thing—”

Rose hung up and shoved her phone into her pocket.

“I need coffee,” she announced, already crossing the street.

Adam hurried behind her, new boots heavier and noisier than the slippers he’d started the day with, which helped her keep better track of him.

Scuttlebutt Coffeehouse was a little too cutesy for Rose's taste, but their Americano was the best in town, and if she was going to survive the afternoon and dinner service at the Whittaker, she needed one.

Opening the door, warm air and the scent of roasted coffee enveloped her, calming her frayed nerves.

The décor was the oceanic dream of a Michael's and Homegoods enthusiast.

Every wall was covered in cheesy quotes about beaches, being a mermaid, and 'vitamin sea', all in varying shades of blues and sandy whites. The menu hanging behind the counter was framed in synthetic driftwood, and every specialty drink was named with an ocean pun.

It was exactly the kind of place Rose loved to heckle under her breath to Everly while they waited for their lattes.

Stepped into the queue, all eyes locked on them.

Well, on *Adam.*

"I promise they'll stop doing this eventually," she whispered to him.

But he didn't notice—her or the overt attention from every single patron.

He was gaping at the decorative fishing nets tacked up above the door leading to the bathroom, eyes wide and face stricken.

"Adam?"

Rose gently touched his elbow, and he blinked, shaking himself.

"Not a fan of nautical wine mom décor either, huh?" She joked, coaxing a lopsided smile from him.

He turned, putting the netting out of his eyeline, and focused on her as she explained the menu.

"Oh, hey, Rose," one of the baristas called, waving from behind the espresso machine. "How's it going?"

She didn’t move far from Adam as she replied, “Good, Sarah, how about yourself?”

“Not bad. I’m almost finished with nursing school,” she said as she finished the order ahead of them, chestnut ponytail swinging behind her as she moved. “I can’t believe I wasn’t at the hospital when they brought that guy in. Jimmy told me you were the one that found him. That’s wild! Did it totally freak you out? Was he even coherent? I bet he was all sorts of messed up.”

“Uh, well…”

“Heather’s cousin, May, told me he’s even staying at your inn,” Sarah rambled on, oblivious to the urgent stare Rose was giving her. “Is he a total weirdo? I bet his brains got scrambled pretty hard. I mean—"

Rose needed to put them both out of their misery.

“Sarah, *this* is Adam,” she cut in. “He’s… *the guy*.”

Brown eyes widened comically as she took in all six-foot-two of Adam in a stunned, sweeping glance.

“You’re… You…” Sarah swallowed, nearly toppling over the stack of paper cups on the counter. “Sorry, nobody told me you were… um… Hi, nice to meet you.”

Adam beamed, waving at her from behind Rose.

Pulling the strap of her purse higher onto her shoulder, she said, “He’s a people person.”

Ordering a large Americano for herself, and a hot chocolate with extra whipped cream for Adam, Rose fought not to smirk when Sarah urged everything was ‘on the house’.

Caffeinated apologies were always better anyhow.

Spotting the glass case of baked goods, Adam stooped down, smushing his nose against it as he ogled the rows of sweets.

“And one of…whatever that’s called,” Rose added, gesturing to a massive brownie covered in candy pieces.

Dropping a few dollar bills into the tip jar when their drinks were ready, Rose flashed a lethal grin.

“Have a great day, Sarah. And you tell Heather’s cousin, May, if she has any questions about the vacancies at the Whittaker, she can call the inn herself and ask.”

Sarah’s cheeks reddened. “Will do, Rose.”

Striding out with Adam close behind her, she stared down a few people who were blatantly rubbernecking.

Adam ignored them, but only because his face was shoved in the paper bag holding his brownie.

Outside, her agitation bubbled over.

“What is with people,” she grit out, stepping off the curb. “You’re not some side show act. It’s like they’ve never seen a stranger before. As if we don’t get swamped with tourists every summer. But no, they save the small town, small minds routine for this.”

Taking a scalding sip from her to-go cup, she glowered and dug her keys out of her bag.

“Shit like this makes me wish I’d moved down to Boston when I had the chance. At least there I’d have a little anonymity. And you… well you’d still get gawked at since you’re freakishly gorgeous, but at least you’d deal with less nosiness.”

Unlocking her car, she started to open her door, but a hand stopped her.

Holding her by the wrist, Adam gently turned her to face him. His expression was open, compassionate, and more than a little flattered by her sudden admission.

“How are you not bothered by everyone treating you like this?” She blurted out, baffled by how calm he was. “You can’t possibly enjoy being stared at all the time.”

The corner of his stupidly perfect mouth twitched as he stared down at her.

Glancing back at the café, he shrugged and arched an eyebrow.

“Well, it would bother me,” she said. “It *does* bother me. Clearly.”

Adam ran his thumb along the inside of her wrist, soothing her as he traced one of the bluey-purple veins prominent beneath her fair skin.

Inhaling until her sides ached, she held her breath for five full seconds before releasing it.

“According to my mother and several ex-boyfriends, I’m too high strung for my own good,” she said. “Looks like you just witnessed it firsthand.”

Smiling, he tilted his head, violet eyes scanning her face.

“Maybe I’m just being over-protective…”

His thumb dipped into the curve of her palm, pressing firmly and leaving a trail of warmth wherever he touched.

“You’ve already been through so much, the last thing you need is for all of East Cove to be gossiping about you for the next thirty years. Especially when you’re so sweet and gentle and sort of innocent in a way and—”

Something caught in her throat, like a tiny fishing hook, reeling the rest of her thoughts back into the depths of her before they flew into the air between them.

Blinking, she ducked her head.

“Anyway…” She muttered, easing out of Adam’s comforting hold. “We better get back before check in and Everly has to run the desk on her

own.”

Adam’s expression sank with disappointment, but he didn’t resist.

Backing up half a step, Rose switched to her hospitality voice, saying, “Better drink up. Don’t want your hot chocolate to get cold.”

She didn’t dare to look at him until they were in the car and pulling off Main Street.

At a stoplight just outside downtown, Adam tapped her shoulder.

Looking over, she watched as he attempted to pantomime something—gesturing to himself, and then at her, and making motions between them that she only half understood.

“You and I… We’re… Clasped? Together? We’re—”

The light turned green, and Rose had to focus her attention back to the road.

“I’m sorry, Adam, I don’t…” She sat up straighter. “Hey, would you want to start learning sign language now? We can do the lessons together.”

Adam tapped her again, nodding so vigorously she was worried for his neck.

Rose smiled. “Great. We’ll start tonight.”

* * * * * * *

He ignored the pang in his chest as Rose withdrew her hand from his.

She had more to say—he could sense it in her pulse fluttering beneath his fingertips—but she’d stopped herself.

Why? She didn’t need to censor herself with him. He wanted to hear all of her thoughts.

He liked listening to her ‘ramble’ as she called it. Liked watching the pink rise up on her cheeks and the glint in her blue eyes as she argued on his behalf.

High strung and over-protective, she'd said.

Adam wasn't sure what the first meant, but if the second one was what caused her to compliment him, then he was more than fine with it.

But as Rose got back into the car, she didn't look at him.

Was she embarrassed?

Should *he* be embarrassed?

Touching her felt as natural as breathing. She'd been upset and he wanted to comfort her—holding her hand was the only thing he could think to do.

But now she was tense, and her gaze stayed locked on the roads and mounds of snow at every corner.

Adam glanced at his hands, fumbling to put his cup of hot chocolate in the little round holder.

Tapping her shoulder, he waited until she glanced over.

You don't need to hide from me, he tried to express, using only basic hand motions. *I understand more than you think. We're connected now. I'm not afraid of—*

"You and I… We're… Clasped? Together? We're—"

Adam tried again. *I see you. Like you see me.*

"I'm sorry, Adam, I don't…"

He sighed quietly, refusing to be deterred. He'd figure out some way to tell her—

"Hey," Rose said. "Would you want to start learning sign language now? We can do the lessons together."

Yes! Yes, yes, yes.

Her smile lit up the interior of the car, and he couldn't help but mirror it.

Adam promised himself that one of the first things he'd communicate to her was just how beautiful she was.

It was all he thought about the whole drive back.

Chapter Five

Rose fidgeted with her heirloom gold seashell necklace, twisting the chain until the clasp was at the back of her neck.

“You look nice,” Everly said, walking across the lobby from the dining room. “Wait, why are you dressed up?”

“Because if I show up to another family dinner in my ripped Pats hoodie, my mother will write me out of the will.”

Smoothing her hands over the hem of her black turtleneck sweater, Rose checked the zipper of her grey pencil skirt for the eighth time.

“What time do you have to be there?” Everly asked, sorting through the stack of paper menus.

“Seven.” Rose glanced at the clock over the mantel. “We should leave soon. I hope Adam doesn’t need help with his buttons again.”

Everly snorted a laugh. “You sure about that?”

“You’re just as bad as Zoey.”

“I know, and I’m not even remotely sorry.”

Hearing the door to Room Ten open and shut, Rose stared expectantly towards the hallway.

Oh…

Emerging in a cream-colored fisherman’s sweater and dark jeans, Adam looked as if he’d stepped off the cover of an upscale menswear catalog.

His jet-black hair was neatly pulled back and twisted into a knot at the nape of his neck. Even his boots had been properly tied, if a little lopsided.

Smiling as he approached, Adam held up his hands.

“Hello, Everly.”

“Was that…” Everly glanced to Rose for confirmation. “That’s my name. You signed my name.”

Adam nodded, repeating the gestures just to prove he could.

“This is so exciting,” Everly told them, beaming at both of them.

Shifting his gaze, Adam’s expression softened. *“Hello, Rose.”*

“Hi,” she said, barely above a whisper.

They’d spent the better part of the last thirty hours practicing ASL, getting comfortable with the basics and adventuring into phrases and name signifiers.

Adam took to it much faster, lending credence to her theory that he must’ve known some form of sign language before losing his memory.

Rose, however, was going to need all the practice she could get. Understanding him was easier, but making the signs herself proved tricky.

“We should get going,” she said, gathering up her coat and purse. Looking to Everly, she added, “Will you tell Lex when they get here that the Del Marco family called and will be checking in late. It’s already been approved. And that we’ll need extra salt spread on the entryways ‘cause it’s going to freeze again tonight. And—”

“Rose, sweetie, we’re fine,” Everly cut in mercifully. “We’ve got this. Go, have fun at dinner. Bring me back some garlic bread.”

Inhaling deeply, Rose nodded.

Why was she nervous? She shouldn’t be nervous. This was a perfectly normal event—something she did all the time. There was absolutely no reason for her to be fretting as much as she was.

Glancing over her shoulder, she spotted Adam watching her attentively, and her stomach trembled.

Okay, so maybe there was *one* reason to be nervous…

“Last chance to back out,” she said as they walked to her car.

Dimly lit by the inn windows, he smirked and shook his head.

“Well, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

A short drive up Atlantic Avenue, a left onto Oyster Lane, and a four-way stop at the intersection of Dune and Pearl Streets later, she pulled in front of the large white colonial home with black shutters and cut the engine.

“I should’ve had more coffee before we came,” she muttered, checking her half-updo in the rearview mirror.

Adam’s grimace was subtle, but she still caught it.

“Don’t worry, we’ll keep you stocked in hot cocoa from now on,” she said with a laugh.

The stone steps leading to the front door were lined with solar globe lights, giving her mother’s expansive—and *expensive*—landscaping an ethereal glow in winter. With snow clinging to bare branches and blanketing the ground, and halos of light dotted along the path, it was something out of a Hallmark movie.

The door flung open before they’d even gotten within knocking distance, and Rose skidded in her heels.

“There you are,” her mother called, dangerously full wine glass in hand. “Come in, come in. Dinner’s almost ready.”

Emily McCleary was the picture of New England sophistication, but underneath her heather grey finely knit sweater and tailored slacks was a fierce BU graduate turned city council woman.

The name McCleary wasn’t just known because of her father’s mayoral legacy.

“Mom, this is—”

“Adam,” Emily exclaimed. “It’s so lovely to meet you. I’ve heard so many wonderful things.”

Rose squinted at her. “You have?”

“Of course I have, don’t be silly.”

“Oh sure, my mistake.”

Crossing the threshold, Rose waited for her mother to close the door before pulling her coat off.

“Adam, this is my mom, Emily,” Rose said as he waved in greeting. “She absolutely hates overly effusive behavior and never exaggerates at all, even a little.”

Eyes the color of her own pegged her with a warning stare. “Stop that. You’re just as bad as your brother.”

Rose would normally be horrified by the comparison, but just this once she grinned.

“Everyone’s in the kitchen,” Emily said, offering her arm to take their coats. “Your dad decided to add lasagna to tonight’s menu, so we officially have six dishes for everyone.”

“Christ, mom, were you planning to feed the whole town?”

“Must you swear?” Emily sighed.

Managing to hang everything in the closet one handed, and without spilling a drop of merlot, her mother turned back to face them.

“Besides, it’s better to be safe than sorry. Now come on, everyone’s in the kitchen.”

With Adam hovering close behind her, Rose followed her through the main hall.

Pink and red heart garland still hung from the banister to the left, and a small white tree with little gold cupids clipped to each artificial branch was still on the entryway table—the last vestiges of Valentine’s Day past.

Rose glanced up at the family pictures she had memorized. Baby photos, wedding portraits, holidays and vacations and graduations.

Her senior year of high school, her parents had decided to remodel the entire downstairs, starting with turning their dining room and kitchen into a large open floorplan perfect for parties and work gatherings.

Of course, the stress of construction had her mother spiraling towards a nervous breakdown, so they'd stopped before completing the rest, leaving the living room still trapped somewhere between eighteen-fifty and two thousand and ten.

"They're here," Emily announced.

A chorus of voices greeted them.

From her spot at the kitchen island, Zoey waved. "I like your sweater, Adam."

"Thank you," he signed, smiling.

"Quickly and succinctly, the McCleary family rollcall," Rose started, leaning over to Adam. "Over by oven is my dad, Daniel. You've met Zoey and Derek. And my grandpa… Wait, where's Grampy?"

"Outside, trying to start the grill," Derek said, sipping his beer. "Something about putting char on the garlic bread."

"Over my dead body is he touching my bread," Emily muttered, glaring out the patio window.

Withdrawing a piping hot lasagna from the oven, her dad swiveled to put it on the counter and yank off his oven mitts.

"Adam, it's great to finally meet you," Daniel said, extending his hand.

Frowning at the outstretched hand for a moment, he didn't move, clearly unsure of the gesture. Eventually, he stuck his own hand out a few inches away from the other man's, but not touching.

“Uh…” Her dad blinked, recovering. Closing the distance, he gripped Adam’s hand and shook it firmly. “Good to have you over.”

Putting her hand on her dad’s shoulder, Rose whispered, “He’s still figuring things out.”

“Hey, no judgements here,” he replied, matching her volume. “He got his bell rung on those rocks. He gets as many learning curves as he needs.”

“You want a beer, Adam?” Derek asked, already opening the fridge.

Looking to Rose, he shrugged. *“Okay.”*

Popping the cap off, Derek handed him the bottle of Budweiser.

Rose ducked around the two of them, grabbing a can of Coke from the fridge before the door closed.

“Cheers,” Derek said, tapping his bottle against Adam’s in a ritual he didn’t understand but seemed happy to participate in.

When Derek turned to help their dad with the food, Adam sniffed his beer and grimaced.

Sliding in close next to him, Rose nudged his elbow. “I’ll trade you,” she whispered, offering the soda. “This is probably more to your liking.”

“Thank you,” he signed, smiling softly.

“You’re welcome.”

If Rose let her gaze linger on Adam’s profile for a beat too long, she’d never admit it.

“So, how do you like staying at the Whittaker, Adam?” Her dad asked as he stirred a large pot of red sauce.

Smiling, Adam nodded enthusiastically. He started to sign but only got as far as ‘I like’ before stalling out.

The entire family watched him flounder in awkward silence.

“Adam and I are learning ASL,” Rose cut in. “We think he might’ve known it before, since he’s picking up on it quickly, but there’s still a lot to cover.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to…” Her dad faltered. “I hope I didn’t offend—”

Stepping forward, Adam shook his head, motioning with his hands in a reassuring way. He smiled, pointing to the food laid out and to the other members of the family, and then looked to her dad again.

“Thank you,” Adam signed. *“Thank you. I’m happy. Thank you.”*

Rose translated quickly, though she didn’t think anyone was confused by his sentiment.

“Just you wait until you try the scampi,” her mother said, gesturing with her wine glass. “Then you’ll really be happy.”

Glancing back at Rose, Adam grinned, the dimple in his left cheek particularly endearing given his mood.

“You want to see the rest of the house, Adam?” Zoey asked, hopping off her barstool.

Nodding, he allowed himself to be tugged by his sweater sleeve around the kitchen island.

“Since when do you like giving house tours?” Rose asked, eyeing her sister.

Zoey tossed her scarlet braid over her shoulder. “Since forever,” she lied. “Besides, I’m bored waiting for dinner.”

“Maybe if you *helped* with dinner, you’d be less bored,” their dad said, but she didn’t respond.

Like an overgrown duck and duckling marching in a line, the duo strode out of the kitchen, through the dining room, and disappeared around the corner.

Derek chuckled behind his beer. “You know she’s going to show him all your embarrassing baby pictures, right?”

Choking mid-sip, Rose rushed to follow them. “Zoey, wait, don’t you dare—”

“Rosie-bell!” Her grandfather’s voice boomed, carried on a gust of frigid wind as the patio door swung wide.

Her heels scraped the tile as she pivoted.

“Grampy,” she said, trying not to wince at the nickname he’d had for her since birth.

“Pop, close the door, it’s cold,” her dad called, pointing with the end of a wooden spoon.

Grampy waved him off as he slid the glass panel shut. “Your grill is shot,” he told him, brushing off his hands. “Couldn’t get it to light if you used jet fuel.”

“Oh, darn it,” her mom deadpanned. “Guess we’ll just have to eat the garlic loaf as is.”

“The grill isn’t shot, pop. It’s just not hooked up right now.”

“Why the hell not?” Grampy frowned.

“’Cause it’s the middle of winter."

“And you watched me go out there to turn it on without saying anything?”

Her dad gestured to the back deck. “You were out the door before I could even open my mouth—”

Rose massaged her left temple.

Her family only had two volumes—loud and louder.

Just when she thought she could slip away to find Zoey and Adam, her grandfather turned to her, clearly done bickering with his son.

“So?” He raised his snow-white caterpillar eyebrows. “Where’s this gentleman friend of yours?”

If the earth swallowed her up in that exact moment, Rose would thank it.

“He’s not my *gentleman friend*, Grampy,” she told him, keeping her voice down. “Adam is… Well, he’s, uh—”

Hurried footfalls approached from behind and milliseconds later there was a tap on her shoulder.

Turning, she nearly collided with Adam’s chest…

And the open photo album he held.

“Oh, God, Zoey what did you do?” Rose called.

“Nothing,” her sister sing-songed back at her.

Adam balanced the heavy album in his hands, pointing to various photos glued to the pages, surrounded by craft store scrapbooking materials. They were all childhood pictures of her—from grades five and six.

“Yeah, that was me,” she said, cringing behind her beer. “All frizzy hair and sunburns and crooked teeth—”

Adam shook his head, locking his vibrant gaze on hers.

Tapping the page, he motioned to the little girl version of her in the photos, and then to her, beaming so brightly it rivaled the recessed lights above them.

Adam repeated the motions and started to sign one-handed.

“Happy.” His smile widened. *“Rose. Happy.”*

He clearly had more he wished to convey, pantomiming to her face, her hair, her smile. He pointed to himself next.

No, at his chest. His heart.

“Happy,” he signed. *“Love.”*

Nodding slowly, Rose did her best to infer.

“Yeah, I was pretty happy back then,” she said, glancing down at the photo of her in denim overalls climbing a boulder at a state park.

“I love. Happy. You.” His one-handed gestures were a little stilted. *“Love. You. Happy.”*

Swallowing, she steadied herself.

“You… love seeing me happy?”

Adam nodded, the dimple in his left cheek deepening.

When was the last time anyone had said that to her, let alone someone who’d only known her for four days?

The floor rocked beneath Rose’s feet as her pulse tripped.

“Hey, Adam, I found her prom photos,” Zoey called from the living room. “Want to see?”

Whirling around so quickly he nearly slung the album across the room, Adam rushed back to meet Zoey, disappearing around the corner once more.

Rose felt four pairs of eyes boring into the back of her head, but she couldn’t turn around yet. Not when all the air was leaving her lungs in a long, quiet *whoosh*-ing sigh.

Appearing at her side, Derek sipped his beer. “I don’t know…” He drawled. “He seems like a *gentleman friend* to me.”

Rose landed her elbow solidly into her brother’s ribs.

His pained groan was all the mood boost she needed.

* * * * * * *

In true McCleary fashion, dinner was a noisy affair.

Rose had to give her family credit though—at least they weren’t trying to pretend to be more civilized than they were.

With Derek and Zoey fighting over the end pieces of garlic bread, and her mother attempting to get them to pass the pot of red sauce, Grampy

and her dad had taken to discussing the road construction near the boatyard. Loudly and with a lot of gesticulating with their forks.

As the guest, Adam was given the other captain's chair at the end of the table, while Rose sat at the corner next to him.

It was also the spot closest to the bottle of pinot noir. A fringe benefit.

"How you doing over there?" She asked, leaning a fraction closer.

With a mouthful of linguine, Adam nodded and attempted to give a closed lipped smile.

"Adam, would you like more scallops?" Her mother interjected, already scooping out a helping.

"Mom, his plate is still—" Rose was cut off by Adam holding up said plate. "…Full."

"He knows good food when he tastes it," Grampy exclaimed, grinning as he tore a piece of bread in half.

Adam bobbed his head, pointing to all the dishes and then himself, attempting to convey his appreciation.

"We're glad you like it," Emily said. Furrowing her brow, she glanced at Rose. "That is what he meant, right?"

Eyeing him over the rim of her wine glass, Rose asked, "Is it?"

Adam signed, *"Yes. Thank you."*

"Yes. Thank you," she repeated for her mother. "Pass the lasagna."

Grabbing the spatula, Zoey helped to serve her sister. "My friends and I have a theory about Adam."

Derek chuckled. "I bet I can guess what it is."

"Don't start," Rose warned.

"Hey, I'm not saying any—"

Their sister blew right past their side argument.

“Jennifer Dealey said that maybe Adam’s a mermaid.”

Derek’s laugh mingled with Rose’s groan. The rest of the table commented over each other, chatter filling the room.

“Oh Zoey, come on,” Rose said, already reaching for the wine bottle.

“What?” Zoey gulped her ginger ale. “He could be.”

Their mother leaned forward. “Zoey, that’s a rude joke to make.”

“It’s not a joke,” she said. “Well, not in a mean way. We’re not making fun of him.”

“Still, Adam has been through quite a lot—”

“I know, mom.”

“—And having you tease him—”

“I’m not, I swear!”

Rose set her glass down. “If you’re going to scold Zoey, you should be scolding your son as well,” she said, glaring at her brother.

Derek balked. “I wasn’t the one gossiping with Jennifer Dealey.”

“I wasn’t gossiping,” Zoey told him firmly.

Their dad cut in, trying to squash the sibling argument, while Grampy attempted to stick up for his youngest grandchild and her ideas about mermaids.

Adam’s warm hand landed on Rose’s forearm.

“What is a…” He thought for a beat before spelling it out. *“M-e-r-m-a-i-d?”*

Rose faltered.

They’d all been so focused on whether or not Zoey’s comment was rude, they hadn’t even considered that Adam had no clue what they were talking about.

“Uh, they’re… mythical creatures,” she said. “Beings. Not monsters. They’re part human and part fish.”

“Like this,” Zoey said, holding out her phone to show the images she’d Googled.

Adam leaned forward, staring at her screen.

A shadow rippled in his gaze—an indigo undulation like a school of fish avoiding a predator.

For a beat, he looked lost and untethered.

Blinking, Adam glanced down at himself and then back up at the phone. Looking to Rose, he tapped his knee and smirked.

Her laugh caught everyone except Adam off guard.

“You’re right, you do have legs,” she said, still smiling. “Long ones, if the clerk at the menswear place was right about your measurements.”

“Why did that sound inappropriate?” Derek mumbled.

Rose stomped on his foot under the table in response.

“Some of the folktales say mermaids can come on dry land if they want,” Zoey said, sliding her phone back into her pocket.

“Zo, finish your food please,” Emily said with a sigh. “And keep the mermaid talk to a minimum.”

Leaning over, Grampy put his arm around the back of Zoey’s chair and stage whispered, “Don’t you worry. I know they’re real. I’ve seen them.”

“Oh geez,” Daniel muttered. “Pop, not another fish tale, okay? We’ve heard plenty.”

“*You’ve* heard plenty,” Grampy countered. “But they haven’t.” Clearing his throat, he continued, “It was the summer of seventy-eight, and I was with my brother on his trawler off the coast of Maine…”

Rose upturned her wine glass, guzzling until it was empty.

Their grandfather's stories of fishing up and down the Atlantic coast, spotting what may or may not have been mermaids, kept Adam on the edge of his seat for the rest of the dinner.

Like an enthralled child being read his favorite book, he hung on every word, leaning so far forward Rose had to push his plate out of the way to keep him from getting red sauce on his sweater.

His reactions only elicited more stories.

Grampy always loved a captive audience.

While Adam and Zoey listened with wonder, and the occasional interjection from the youngest McCleary, their mother snuck off to get dessert ready—four kinds of pastry and a cheesecake to go with the pot of coffee she was brewing.

Sopping up the last bit of sauce with his bread, Derek leaned over to Rose.

"So, I gotta tell you something, and you're not going to like it."

Snorting, she said, "What a great opener."

"Pete's back in town."

Rose stilled, hand hovering over her water glass.

"I saw him today," Derek continued. "At the hardware store."

Blood roared in her ears.

"Okay."

"And he saw me before I could get through the checkout line and __"

"And what?" Rose shot him a glare.

Derek attempted a shrug. "He just said hi. Asked how it was going. You know, polite bullshit."

"That's it?"

Shifting in his seat, he stared at the bread he wasn't eating. "Yeah."

“Liar.”

He sighed. “He asked about you.”

There wasn’t enough wine in all of East Cove for Rose to have this conversation.

“Tell me you didn’t.”

“I just said you were doing really good,” Derek told her. “That’s it. I thought he should know you’ve thrived *without* him around.”

Rose turned towards him. “I don’t want Pete knowing anything about how I’m doing—good, bad, or anywhere in between.”

“We weren’t talking *about* you. I’m not Jennifer Dealey,” he countered. “Trust me, Pete’s lucky I didn’t pummel his face in the second I saw him.”

“I don’t want you punching his lights out either, Derek,” Rose snapped, louder than she’d intended.

“Don’t tell me you’ve forgiven the little prick.”

“Whether or not I have is none of your business,” she shot back. “And next time you decide to stick your nose where it doesn’t belong, keep me out of it.”

Standing, her chair scraped against the hardwood so loudly everyone else stopped talking, eyes glued to her as she moved away from the table.

She needed to be anywhere but in that dining room.

Muttering something about getting another drink, she strode out, circling the kitchen island and disappearing down the hallway.

Why tonight? Why did Derek have to tell her tonight?

Why did he have to tell her at all?

She knew why. He wanted her to feel prepared for when she inevitably ran into Pete herself.

But that didn’t soothe the burning anger inside her.

Leaning her elbow on the end of the banister, she inhaled deeply and slowly, keeping her eyes closed.

Pete.

He was supposed to be in Maine, building a new life with a woman who wasn’t Rose.

The one who hadn’t been too busy starting her business.

The one who had more time for him.

The one he slept with in their bed while Rose was scraping off old wallpaper in Room Seven, trying to be ready in time for opening weekend.

Pain she kept buried threatened to breech the surface, and hot tears stung her eyes.

Footsteps sounded behind her, and Rose sighed raggedly.

“I’m fine, mom,” she said without turning around. “I just didn’t want to give Derek a bloody nose at the dinner table, so…”

A gentle tap on her shoulder made her jerk, nearly headbutting the other person in the chin as she whirled.

“Oh God,” she cried, catching herself before knocking into him. “Adam.”

Unfazed by their close call, he frowned as he scanned her face.

“Hurt,” he signed, gesturing to her.

“No, no, I’m…” Rose swallowed thickly. “I’m okay. Let’s go back for—”

He shook his head firmly, arching an eyebrow like he was calling her out for trying to lie.

Resolve crumbling, she blew out a breath.

“Derek just brought up someone I don’t like talking about. Or thinking about, for that matter.”

“Who?” He signed.

Was she really going to tell this sweet, trusting man about one of the many cruelties she’d experienced while standing under a garland of naked cupid babies and sparkly red hearts?

“My ex-fiancé.”

Apparently, the answer was yes.

Confusion tugged at Adam’s features and Rose faltered.

Did he remember the concept of marriage or commitment?

“He was my… partner,” she explained. “We were going to spend our lives together. That is until he… Well, he left me. For someone else.”

Rose couldn’t be sure, but for a moment she swore anger flashed in Adam’s eyes.

“He left town, but I guess he’s back in East Cove now,” she said. “Going to hardware stores and saying hello to my brother and doing God knows what else…”

She gestured vaguely as she trailed off, turning to pluck at the decorative linen on the entryway table.

“I know I shouldn’t let it get to me,” she muttered, staring at the pale pink fabric under her fingers. “But—”

Before she could finish her thought, Rose was yanked forward, almost completely off her feet.

Faceplanting into cream colored wool, she was crushed against his muffled chest in a tight bear hug. Forehead and nose hitting his sternum, she let out a muffled gasp, hands flying out at her sides.

Strong arms held her steady as her shoes scuffed the floor.

“Erm… Fanks Admm,” she mumbled against his torso.

Swaying as he hugged her, Adam nodded, bumping the top of her head with his chin.

The position was awkward, and made it a little difficult to breathe, but it was comforting too. Like being wrapped in a weighted blanket and squeezed in a padded vice.

He smelled good too. Like rich soap and the faintest hint of saltwater.

Searching for a place to put her hands, Rose pulled back a fraction.

"You should have warned me," she said. "Now you have lipstick on your sweater."

Adam released her and shrugged, completely unconcerned with the stain.

Clearing her throat, Rose smoothed the front of her outfit.

"Thank you, Adam. I… I appreciate you coming to check on me."

Before she could suggest they head back to the table, Adam reached for her again.

With a touch so light she could have convinced herself she imagined it, he tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, fingertips brushing the sensitive curve. He smiled down at her with such tenderness Rose could barely breathe.

"Beautiful," he signed. *"Beautiful. Rose."*

She stared into his ocean-violet eyes, mesmerized by their depths.

"Thank you," she whispered, feeling totally at a loss for the first time in her life.

And when his gaze dropped to her lips, Rose was milliseconds from urging him closer.

The sound of her mother dropping a spoon or spatula or some other kitchen utensil on the counter shattered the intimate bubble surrounding them.

Pull yourself together, Rose.

“Come on,” she murmured, tugging his sleeve gently. “You’re going to love mom’s cheesecake.”

* * * * * * *

Derek apologized the only way he knew Rose would accept.

He let her take the last chocolate croissant home.

Tucking it into a separate Tupperware container, he set it atop the already large stack of plasticware stuffed to the brim with leftovers.

Rose looked up at her brother and smiled primly.

“Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” he muttered.

And with that, hurt feelings were mended.

While Zoey showed Adam more of their family mementos and trinkets, and took a few sneaky photos to send to her group chat, Rose shoved leftovers into a tote bag big enough to carry it all.

“How you doing, Rosie?” Her dad asked, turning away from the plates he was rinsing.

“I’m going to be bloated for a week after eating all this food,” she said. “Not that I’m complaining.”

He chuckled and shook his head. “That’s not really what I meant.”

Rose paused, looking over at him. “I’m alright,” she murmured. “Chin up, shoulders back, just like always.”

“I heard what Derek said…” He turned the water off, grabbing a dish towel.

“Oh, dad, it’s okay. He stuck his foot in it—big surprise—but we’re good now.”

“Yeah, but… You know—"

She couldn’t bear to press on the emotional bruise twice in one night.

“I’m fine, dad. I promise,” she cut him off. “I’ll manage. I always do.”

The skin around her dad’s eyes tightened but he didn’t get the chance to reply.

“Oh my God, Rose,” Zoey called, jogging back into the kitchen with a huge grin plastered on her face. “Look at this. I introduced Adam to Hector.”

Rose frowned. “Your beta fish?”

Zoey nodded, pulling something up on her phone.

“Look, look, look,” she said, turning the screen towards her. “Watch what happens.”

Rose leaned closer, squinting at the video.

It was mostly from an angle, Adam’s face in profile as he stared through the glass at the purple and blue fish.

After a moment, he lifted his index finger, holding it up to the tank gently.

Hector, a usually placid, lethargic fish, rushed for Adam’s fingertip, darting back and forth faster than Rose had ever seen him swim.

The video turned shaky for a few seconds as Zoey laughed and zoomed in on Hector doing somersaults in the water, wriggling and flapping his fins, seemingly dancing all around Adam’s visible digit.

“Huh,” Rose said when the video stopped. “Well that’s different.”

Zoey gaped at her. “Different? That’s all you have to say?”

“I’m sorry, what am I *supposed* to say?”

“You have absolutely zero imagination. None.”

Rose smirked. “You’re right. I’m extremely boring and dull.”

“Yup,” Zoey said, already walking away as she typed something. “I’m posting this to TikTok.”

“Zoey, don’t—”

Her sister was around the corner and gone before Rose could plead her case.

“She’s a lot like you, you know,” her dad said with a laugh as he finished wiping down a dinner plate. “Independent. Spirited. Stubborn.”

Rose watched him in silence.

“But I know it’s a bit lonely at times,” he continued, tone sobering. “I think sometimes she feels like she has to handle everything on her own. I hope she knows she can ask for help when she needs it.”

Her father was not a subtle man, but he was a good one. And for that, Rose was forever grateful.

“She does. And she will,” Rose said. “When she’s ready.”

With a single nod, their coded conversation came to an end.

But before she walked away, Rose leaned over and kissed her dad on the cheek.

“Love you.”

His soft smile was accompanied by faint crow’s feet. “Love you too, Rosie.”

As soon as Adam returned, she ushered them towards the door, gathering food and coats as they went.

“I’m so glad you could make it tonight, Adam,” her mother said as she followed everyone to the front door. “I hope we didn’t overwhelm you too much.”

Adam smiled, shaking his head.

“Thanks for dinner, mom,” Rose said, buttoning her coat. “It was amazing, as always.”

Pulling her into a hug, her mother stage whispered, “I take it back. He doesn’t seem like a dangerous man with mental problems at all.”

“I’m pretty sure he can hear you,” Rose stage whispered back.

“Oh, um…” She floundered a moment before smiling a little too widely. “Adam, you’re welcome back any time.”

“Thank you,” he signed.

“I’ll follow you out,” Derek said, yanking on his Carhart jacket. “Make sure you get down the hill okay.”

“The roads are fine,” Rose started to argue.

“Could be icy,” he said. “You never know.”

Her father wasn’t subtle, and neither was her brother.

“Alright,” she yielded. “But no flicking your brights at me like last time.”

Derek chuckled, trailing behind them as they called out more goodbyes and shut the door.

Once in her 4Runner, away from the noise and the jostling and the television her grandfather always watched with the volume way up even as he dozed off, Rose could finally take a full breath and think.

“Well, you survived,” she joked, clicking her seatbelt and putting the car in gear.

Adam smiled, resting his hand on his very full belly.

“Yeah, that’s going to happen every time you come over.” Rose blinked. “If you come over. If you *want* to, I mean. You’re always welcome. You just—”

His other hand found hers in the dark, gently squeezing her fingers.

“Yes. Thank you. Happy.”

Rose exhaled slowly. “Good. I’m glad.”

She didn’t say anything, but she could sense him staring at her the whole drive home.

He wanted her to be happy too.

* * * * * * *

Peeling his sweater over his head, Adam sighed happily.

While it kept him warm, the material itched, especially around the collar, driving him slowly insane throughout dinner.

However, Rose's expression when she saw him in it was worth every pinprick of discomfort.

His fingers rubbed at the faint red stain she'd left on the wool when he'd hugged her.

We were going to spend our lives together, her words echoed in his head. *He left me. For someone else.*

Adam's stomach soured.

Someone hurt Rose.

Someone promised to be there for her, care for her, love her, and they broke that promise.

They broke her heart.

The same heart that had been nothing but generous and kind with him.

He wasn't sure if he was a particularly angry or violent man before his accident, but hearing the pained tremor in her voice as she explained was almost enough to make him become one.

Rose deserved better.

Much, much better.

Folding his sweater as best he could, Adam laid it out on top of his dresser. He fought with the laces of his boots for a few moments before finally freeing his feet and yanking his socks off as well. Then his belt and jeans.

By the time he was mostly undressed, he was huffing and shoving his hair out of his face.

Was this routine always so difficult? Or was he weakened from whatever happened to him?

Glancing at the bed, he frowned.

It was a comfortable mattress and the pillows felt great under his head. But he felt strangely exposed each night, stretching across the red duvet.

Maybe he should ask Rose if she felt the same way. Did she do something to feel more secure as she slept? Was there a position or trick she used?

He felt a little embarrassed about that though.

He knew these things once. Maybe he could jump start his memory by dealing with them again.

Adam tugged at the quilt, straightening the wrinkles along the surface.

But he yanked a bit too hard, pulling it off the corner of the bed and flipping one of the pillows over.

Going over to fix it, he saw the layers of other quilts beneath the top one. Buttery soft white linen, a fluffy square stitched blanket, even a funny shaped one that covered the entirety of the mattress.

Ohhh…

Cheeks going bright red, Adam pulled the bedding back further.

He was meant to sleep *underneath* these. Not on top of them.

Crawling into bed, he wriggled until he was completely covered all the way to his chin and smiled.

This was much more comforting.

Rolling onto his side, he tucked himself in and let his eyes drift shut.

He'd get the hang of things eventually.

Chapter Six

Balancing her tablet, notebook, and a stack of table linens, Rose pushed open the kitchen door with the toe of her shoe.

“Morning, sweetie,” Everly called, bent over to rearrange the muffin trays in the oven. “Coffee’s fresh.”

“Thank God,” she said, setting everything down to grab a mug. “Hey, have you finalized the menu for the Saint Patrick’s Day dinner?”

“Almost. I need our meat guy to call me back,” Everly said. “If I’m going to make proper Guinness stew, I’m going to need better cubed beef than the last stuff he sent us.”

Leaning back to savor her first sip, Rose hummed. “Alright, just try to get everything to me today so I can put it on the website.”

Swinging her towel over her shoulder, Everly turned to the warmed skillets on the stove. “Can you believe it’s March First already? I swear, I blink, and days go by.”

Funny, the last week had felt agonizingly slow.

Or was it just that there didn’t seem to be enough to keep her mind occupied from—

The kitchen door swung open, startling her into spilling coffee down her chin.

Adam’s gaze found her immediately.

“Good morning,” he signed, smiling brightly.

Sucking coffee off her bottom lip, Rose attempted to smile back.

“Mhm, morning,” she said, turning away to grab a napkin.

Everly waved from her station at the prep table. “Muffins are almost done. I added extra chocolate chips, just for you Adam.”

Pulling his silken black hair into a ponytail, he secured it with a band. *“Thank you.”*

Patting herself down, Rose begged her pulse to even out.

God, why did she have to act like such a weirdo around him?

Every single day she managed to embarrass herself in front of Adam. Tripping, knocking into a doorframe, dropping a water glass or box of pens for the desk—all of that and more, and always when he was staring right at her.

It was like being in eighth grade all over again.

A soft touch on her elbow brought her around.

"Are you okay?" Adam furrowed his brow. *"Did you burn yourself?"*

Rose shook her head. "No, no, I'm fine. Clumsy and glad I wore black, but fine."

Relief smoothed his features. *"Good."*

But his hand went back to her arm, thumb gently stroking along the inner bend.

As goosebumps spread across her skin, his violet eyes darkened minutely, pupils dilating.

If he were anyone else, Rose would know exactly what that look meant.

But with Adam…

He was equal measures of innocent and sensual, knowing and unknowing all at once.

It was truly, fully messing with her.

Shaking herself, Rose put some distance between them, stepping back to reach for her iPad.

"I found more ASL videos for us to study," she said, unlocking her screen. "Not that you're struggling. You're doing really well. Obviously, I mean, you don't need my validation. You know you're doing well. I just

thought—” She took a breath, trying to stop the rambling. “Anyway, these might be good to try.”

Adam tilted his head, smiling. *“Thank you. Will you watch them with me?”*

“Of course,” she said, perhaps a little too eagerly.

Their evening routine for the last week had developed naturally.

Once Lex was in for their shift, Rose would make two mugs of hot chocolate and meet Adam in his room to practice ASL. Adam had picked up signing much faster than Rose, but her comprehension was quick, which made communicating easier.

When practicing new phrases and words grew tiresome, Adam would pass her the remote to his television and plop down on his bed excitedly, ready to be introduced to any show Rose deemed worthy.

The first few times she picked nature documentaries—thinking they’d be relaxing—but after an entire episode on the wild tuna fishing industry, Adam wasn’t too keen on them anymore.

Cooking shows were a safe bet. As were the flashy, over the top screaming matches displayed on reality television.

He had a lot of questions about those.

And Rose didn’t mind answering.

“Are you hungry, Adam?” Everly asked, flipping an omelet.

“Starving,” he signed. *“But first I want to restock the silverware rolls.”*

Rose shook her head. “You don’t have to—”

Arching an eyebrow at her, Adam smirked.

Maybe one day she’d stop trying to convince him to do less work.

Maybe.

“Okay, okay,” she said, returning to her coffee. “Never mind. Go earn your keep, since you’re so insistent.”

His smile widened as he gathered up the tray of clean cutlery and a stack of cloth napkins.

Smiling behind the rim of her coffee mug, Rose watched him stride out of the kitchen, glancing over his shoulder twice.

He’d taken to helping with odd jobs around the inn. Anything Rose, Lex, or Everly needed, Adam was right there, ready and willing to figure it out if it meant easing their workload even a fraction.

His cheery disposition and eagerness to be a team player was gaining him a fan club amongst all of their staff.

As the kitchen door swung shut, Everly sidled up next to Rose, selecting two bell peppers to chop.

“So, we’ve reached the flirting stage, huh?”

Rose’s face burned but she ignored it. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Scooping up her things and her coffee, she hurried out of the kitchen as Everly called after her, “The lady doth protest—”

“I know, I know,” she retorted over her shoulder, walking past the wait station.

Glancing over, she caught Adam’s stare and almost instantly rammed her lower half into the back of one of the café chairs.

I cannot tell Everly about that.

* * * * * * *

As Rose came down after checking the top floor linen supply, she paused in the middle of the staircase as the sound of familiar voices drifted up from the lobby.

Voices she wasn’t expecting a visit from and who didn’t call first…

“You know the difference between a Phillips and a flat head?” Derek asked.

The resounding silence told her exactly who her brother was talking to.

“Okay, so this one is a Phillips head. See the cross pattern at the top? And then this one is a flat head, ‘cause… well, it’s flat.”

“Derek, your phone is buzzing,” Zoey interjected.

“Let it go to voicemail.”

“It’s from someone named Shelly.”

“*Definitely* let it go to voicemail.”

Rose continued her descent, stopping at the end of the banister.

“Ahem.” She waited for her brother to glance over his shoulder. “What are you doing?”

“Teaching Adam a little bit about tools,” Derek said, holding up a handful of screwdrivers.

When she glared at him, Derek quickly added, “He asked, I swear.”

“Adam?” Rose’s stare shifted over.

Tucking a stray lock of black hair behind his ear, Adam nodded. *“I wanted to know how to fix things,”* he signed. *“So I can be more useful.”*

Rose sighed, taking a few steps forward. “Adam, you’re already useful. You don’t need to do even more. Besides, it’s not like I’m paying you—”

“You let me live here. That’s payment enough.” Tapping Derek on the arm, Adam jerked his chin towards the tools he held. *“Please, continue.”*

Derek squinted at the gestures Adam made.

“That meant keep going, right?” He asked. “I’m, uh… I’m still learning.”

Adam smiled, nodding gently.

Rose blinked. “You’re learning ASL?”

“We all are,” Zoey chimed in, glancing up from her phone. “Derek’s kind of slow on the uptake though.”

“Hey, languages were never my strong suit,” he said. “There’s a reason I’m a contractor, not a librarian.”

Warmth settled behind Rose’s sternum.

The McClearys were really campaigning for family of the year.

Crossing the distance to where Zoey was lounging on the lobby sofa, her sneakers propped up on the vintage coffee table, Rose nudged her knees until she got the hint.

“Not on the furniture,” she said as Zoey sighed dramatically.

“Fiiiine.” Planting her feet on the floor, Zoey looked up. “Hey, did you check your email?”

Rose frowned. “No? Why?”

“I sent you something.”

“Zoey…”

“It’s nothing bad,” her sister exclaimed. “I promise.”

“Is this another Loki cosplay video? ‘Cause I told you I don’t really get the references…” Rose said, wandering over to the desk to retrieve her phone.

Two clicks brought up the email filled with links.

Article after blog post after book after PDF all with ‘mermaid’ somewhere in the title.

“For Christ’s sake, Zo.”

The two men paused their lesson, twisting to stare at her.

Zoey flung her arms over her head. “What? They make really good points!”

“I’m going to tell mom you asked to join the lacrosse team—wait, no, cross country—so you’ll stop having so much time on your hands.”

“You wouldn’t,” Zoey gasped.

“Try me, kid.”

Derek pressed his elbow into the top of his bent knee. “Do I want to know what you’re bickering about?”

“Does Shelly want to know why you’re avoiding her calls?” Zoey mocked.

Rose smirked, crossing her arms. “Shelly from the Rusty Anchor? Don’t tell me you fouled your own watering hole.”

Derek poked around his bag aimlessly. “Nah, it wasn’t like that.”

An opportunity presented itself, and both sisters jumped on it.

“I bet he professed his love,” Zoey cooed.

“Under the moonlight,” Rose added sweetly.

“While violins played.”

“And an Italian guy sang in the background.”

Derek groaned. “I hate both of you.”

“Shelly and Derek, sittin’ in a tree…” Zoey sang.

“K-i-s-s-i-n-g,” Rose finished.

Adam’s gaze bounced between the three siblings, confused and entertained in equal measure.

“For the record, I’d have preferred sitting in a tree,” Derek said. “Alone.”

Lowering onto the couch next to her sister, Rose said, “Not your soulmate then?”

“She was nice enough,” he said, turning to the heating vent in the floor he was in the middle of adjusting. “But we didn’t really have much in

common. Her favorite show is The Bachelor. What am I supposed to do with that?"

Rose rolled her eyes. "Maybe watch it with her? Or find something else to do together?"

"She collects Funko Pops," he continued. "Has an entire room dedicated to them in her house."

Rose grimaced. "Well, that's a bit excessive, but at least she knows what she likes."

"Der's just being picky 'cause Shelly isn't the one he *really* wants to take out," Zoey teased.

Derek's murderous glare stole all mirth from Zoey's expression.

"Put a sock in it, kid, or you're walking home."

"What am I missing?" Rose asked, looking over to her sister.

"Nothing," they both said in unison.

Footsteps sounded through the dining area and into the lobby.

"Okay, I think I've finalized the menu for Saint Patrick's day, but I'm reserving the right to change my mind if our meat guy dicks me over again."

Tapping her palm with a sheet of paper, Everly halted at the corner of the desk when she realized Rose wasn't alone.

"Oh, hi!" She beamed at Derek. "I didn't know you were coming over today. Did I?"

"Not unless you're psychic," Rose muttered.

Derek fumbled a wrench, dropping it with a clatter into his toolkit.

"Shit, sorry, uh—" He cleared his throat. "Hi."

"Hi," Everly repeated.

Sharing a look with her sister, Zoey smirked. "Hi," she called from the couch, loud enough to make both Derek and Everly jump.

“Hi, Zo,” Everly said, smoothing her free hand over her apron. “Are you guys hungry? I could make us lunch.”

If Rose had blinked, she’d have missed the eagerness flashing in her brother’s eyes before he ducked his head.

“Uh, yeah, that… That would be nice,” he said, shrugging as he rifled through his tools.

Shoving herself up off the couch, Zoey jerked her chin towards Adam. “I’m not hungry yet. Wanna go for a walk?”

“Sure.”

Rose frowned. “Zoey, that might not—”

“Come with us,” Adam signed. *“It’ll be fun.”*

“Someone needs to stay and watch the desk.”

Leaning comically far to the right, Everly snagged a placard from behind the computer monitor and plopped it onto the wooden top.

It read ‘ring bell for service’.

“I’ll be in the back cooking,” she said with a subtly devious smile. “I can come out if someone needs something.”

Derek stayed uncharacteristically quiet, screwing or unscrewing the same corner of the heating vent.

Glancing out the window, Rose had to admit it would be a shame to miss out on such nice weather.

Turning back, she caught Adam’s stare and her stomach trembled.

Would be a shame to miss out on spending time with him as well, though she refused to acknowledge that part.

“Okay, let me grab my coat,” she said, standing.

It took a little more convincing for Adam to get his as well.

Nice weather in March still meant chilly winds and occasional bouts of rain. The last thing Rose wanted was for him to catch a cold.

Minutes later, Zoey was in the lead, hurrying in the direction of the public access point to Harbor Beach.

“I should have worn better shoes for this,” Rose said as they trekked down the gravel lane towards the cut through between the dunes.

Adam looked at hers and then his own. *“We could take them off,”* he signed.

“Not on these rocks, I’m not,” she laughed. “Maybe when we’re on the sand. But I’m not sticking my feet in the water.”

“Why not?”

“Because I like being able to feel all my toes,” she said. “The water is way too cold.”

Adam’s smile was teasing as he signed, *“You’re always worried about the cold.”*

“Because I’m a New Englander,” she replied. “Being cold or dealing with cold is ninety percent of our personalities.”

As soon as the gravel gave way to wooden boards and then sand, Adam hurried his pace to move in front of Rose and turned to face her.

Mischief lit up his violet eyes as he lifted one leg and yanked off his boot, then repeated the process.

“Adam—”

He was already taking his socks off, shoving them into his shoes and dropping them by the walkway.

“You’re going to get—”

She didn’t get to finish, as he took her hand and pulled her with him, jogging towards the foaming waves.

Rose waited with her heart in her throat, expecting him to have some kind of negative reaction to being so close to the ocean. It wasn’t like his last experience had been particularly joyful.

But either the trauma of what he went through hadn't marred his subconscious, or he was very good at faking it for her benefit.

Rose doubted the latter.

Adam wasn't much for faking anything.

Gulls squawked and flapped their wings nearby, bickering about their latest meal they'd hunted. A few other beachcombers wandered around, searching for sea glass and shells.

"See, they have their shoes on," she told him, letting herself get pulled along the uneven beach terrain.

Adam grinned over his shoulder, winds freeing a few strands of hair from his ponytail.

Spotting Zoey crouched by some boulders, taking pictures of the greenish-brown seaweed clinging to the rocky surface, Rose decided she could let her guard down, just for a moment or two.

The ocean was a stormy moss color—like thunder clouds had sunk beneath the surface of the briny water to churn, and churn, and churn until everyone in East Cove and beyond could sense the sea's agitation.

Slowing just a foot away from the water's edge, Rose inhaled the salty air deep into her lungs.

Adam released her hand to sign, *"Your turn."*

"My—Ohh no," she said, shaking her head. "This is all you. I'm not __"

Dropping to one knee, he wrapped his palm around her calf and lifted until he could slide her black flat from her foot.

Letting out an undignified noise, Rose could only brace on his shoulder as he did the same thing to her other foot and wet sand seeped between her toes.

"Now we match," Adam signed, grinning up at her.

Rose cringed, trying to ignore the cold. “If that was your goal, we could’ve just gotten the same knit sweaters or something.”

Tucking her flats into his coat pocket, he stood. Making his way towards the incoming tide, his hand grazed her waist, and Rose locked every joint in her body so as not to lean fully into the touch.

“Hey, Adam,” Zoey called. “Wave!”

Twisting to face her, he did just as she asked, waving his arm over his head and smiling as she took several pictures.

“You don’t have to let her pester you,” Rose said, falling in stride next to him.

Adam shook his head. *“I’m not bothered. I like Zoey. She’s fun, and…”* He trailed off, dropping his hands.

“And what?”

He glanced up at the clouds. *“She doesn’t… act scared around me.”*

Rose blinked, mouth falling open.

“You think people are scared of you?” She searched his profile. “Do you think *I’m* scared of you?”

He thought for a moment. *“You’re not always… comfortable when I’m around.”*

Rose’s stomach twisted into double knots.

“Oh. That’s not… I’m—”

“It’s okay,” he signed, cutting her off. *“You don’t treat me badly because of it. I can just… feel it.”*

Adam wasn’t simply observant, he was eerily perceptive. He could read people better than they gave him credit for.

It was something she needed to remember more.

Worrying her bottom lip, she considered her words carefully.

“I’m not uncomfortable around you, Adam,” she said. “I’m… cautious.”

Tilting his head, he arched an eyebrow in question.

“You’ve been through a lot,” she continued. “It’s easy to get overwhelmed.”

“I don’t feel overwhelmed,” he signed. *“I feel happy. I like being here and I like you.”*

Warmth leaked into her limbs, but Rose refused to acknowledge the sensation.

“You spend a lot of time with me,” Adam continued. *“But you stay… away.”* He frowned. *“Distant.”*

Rose opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

He wasn’t wrong.

She’d been keeping a wall up, ever since the night at her parents’ house.

Adam’s earnest acceptance and care had rattled her. It had been a long time since she’d experienced even a fraction of something like that with another person, and that man left her broken hearted and alone.

She may have spent every day with Adam, but she hadn’t let him in. Not truly.

And he knew it.

“Is it because I don’t have my memories back yet?” He asked, holding her stare. *“Are you worried I’m… What was it your mother called me?”*

Rose’s features pinched. “A dangerous man with mental problems,” she said, hating every syllable. “My mom needs sensitivity training. And no, I don’t think that of you.”

Weaving to the right, she avoided an incoming wave while Adam let the water lap over his feet, soaking the cuffs of his jeans.

He didn't even flinch at the frigid water.

"But I'd be lying if I said your lack of memory wasn't concerning," she added.

Adam nodded solemnly, looking down at the seafoam left in curving, wobbly lines along the sand.

"Not because it makes me distrustful of you," she hurried to say. "It's just… I don't do particularly well with the unknown."

The wind kicked up, and Adam's hair whipped around his neck and jaw, giving him a wild appearance that did something to Rose's insides.

"I don't mind not knowing anything about myself before," he signed, again completely unfazed by another wave rushing over his bare feet. *"I know who I am now. Where I am now. I know I want to stay."*

"You've only been here a little over a week." Rose's throat tightened painfully. "You might have a family, Adam. People who miss you and want you back."

He shrugged. *"I could also have no one. I might have been completely alone before you found me."*

Despite herself, she barked out a laugh. "Trust me, someone like you was not alone."

Eyeing her with interest, Adam arched a brow. *"What do you mean?"*

She told herself it was windburn across her cheeks. That was all.

"I mean you… You're…" She gestured at him vaguely. "You have a mirror in your room, you know. You should pay attention next time you look in it."

At first she didn’t think he understood her poor attempt at deflection.

But then the violet in Adam’s eyes darkened to a gorgeous indigo and his gaze dropped to her lips for a pulse-thundering beat.

Thank God they were outside. If she’d been stuck in a room with him, she was certain she’d suffocate from the pressurized atmosphere between them.

“*You like me too,*” he signed, grinning smugly at her.

Rose sputtered. “I—I didn’t—”

“*You do,*” he signed as she fought to put a sentence together. “*You just don’t want to admit it.*”

Forcing her stare towards the coastline ahead of them, her lips twitched as she tried and failed to hide her smile.

Jogging through the shallow surf, Adam spun to face her, walking backwards.

“*It’s okay,*” he signed, the dimple in his left cheek even more pronounced as he smiled. “*I can wait.*”

Rose rolled her eyes, but still she smirked. “I wonder if you were this cocky before you lost your memories.”

He let out a rough rumbling sound—the closest thing to a laugh he could manage.

“*Maybe,*” he signed. “*Or maybe I was shy and awkward.*”

“Doubtful.”

“*See? I’m not as unknown to you as you thought.*”

Another larger wave crashed at his feet and splashed all the way up to his shins. This time Rose couldn’t dodge it, and the icy water shocked her.

Gasping, she jerked back, only for Adam to catch her hand and pull her with him.

“Adam, wait,” she laughed.

He didn’t listen, hauling her along the sand in search of shells and bits of driftwood.

“Hey guys, look!” Zoey called, running to catch up with them. “Look, look, look!”

Following where she was pointing, they both stared out at the ocean.

“What?” Rose asked, but Zoey didn’t need to answer.

A spotted dolphin leapt from the waves, arching beautifully in the air before diving back down with a high-pitched chirping cry.

Before she could speak, another dolphin appeared, launching itself out of the water in the other direction.

“They’re playing,” Zoey said with heaving breaths. “They’ve been getting closer and closer this whole time.”

Bending down, Adam scooped a handful of water to splash in their direction, beaming at the flipping and twirling dolphins.

“I hope they don’t get too close and beach themselves,” Rose murmured.

As Adam smacked the waves, the dolphins swam an extra few yards away, and her worry eased.

“This is so cool,” Zoey giggled, holding her phone up, recording the marine life show.

Rose glanced to Adam with his hand submerged in the water.

When he made a loop, so did the dolphins. When he moved left, so did they. When he moved forward or back, so did they.

She rationalized it, thinking it must be a coincidence. They were wild animals, after all. It wasn’t like they were doing tricks for them.

But when the water rose to Adam’s knees and he finally yielded, backing away from the incoming tide until he wasn’t touching the waves, Rose swore the dolphin cries she heard were mournful ones.

Chapter Seven

The cinema had a power outage.

Not exactly the end of the world, but on a Thursday night in East Cove, that cut entertainment options down by one-fifth. The only other possible avenues to stave off the fool's spring boredom were playing pool at the Rusty Anchor, open mic night at the Scuttlebutt, one of the many lectures at the community center, or the middle school talent show.

Which meant an unprecedented amount of people had decided eating dinner at the Whittaker and listening to a solo acoustic guitarist was more appealing than amateur poetry and stale beer.

Too bad Rose had sent her server home, thinking they'd have a quiet night.

Rushing into the kitchen, she tacked up the next order for Everly.

"Table six would like extra parmesan on their salads, and I'm pretty sure the woman at table five is trying to invite them to have a foursome."

Everly laughed, stirring a heap of sautéed vegetables. "And I thought the spiciest thing in here would be my ghost pepper hot sauce."

"These go to table two, right?" Rose asked, picking up the plates of appetizers.

"You're asking me?"

"Didn't I write it down or something?"

Everly adjusted the knobs on the stove, flipping the contents of one of the skillets. "Seriously, call Becca to come back in."

"Absolutely not. I made the call, I'll live with the consequences. Hopefully table two likes their appetizers whether or not they ordered them."

The kitchen door swung open as Adam returned with a bussing tray heaped with dishes needing to be washed.

“Someone asked for a dessert menu,” he signed after setting everything down in the sink. *“And if I wanted to have some fun later. Do you know what that means?”*

Rose sighed, glancing over her shoulder at Everly. “Horny retirees are going to be the end of me.” Striding towards Adam, she continued. “It’s nothing you want any part of, trust me. I’ll handle the dessert menu and remind them you’re *not* on it.”

He blinked owlishly. *“What does **that** mean?”*

“Never mind,” she said, opening the door with her hip. “Thanks for bussing.”

Slipping out of the kitchen, Rose rounded the corner and carefully entered the dining room. As she delivered the plate of appetizers she was forty percent certain table two had ordered, she refilled waters and greeted several people she recognized as locals.

Movement from the corner of her eye caught her attention, and she glanced up from the order she was taking.

A dark-haired woman no older than thirty stood in the entryway looking equal parts lost and annoyed.

Rose steeled herself, plastering a smile on her face as she approached.

“Hi there, welcome to the Whittaker,” she said. “Are you here for dinner?”

Aquamarine eyes locked onto her so swiftly Rose nearly flinched.

“I… I suppose I am,” the woman said with a voice much softer than her angular features hinted at.

“Great,” Rose said, forcing a cheery lilt. “How many are in your party?”

“Just myself.”

“It looks like we’ve got a table over there in the corner,” Rose said, gesturing to the two-top. “Make yourself comfortable and I’ll be right over to take your order.”

The woman nodded, weaving through the dining room towards the back.

It wasn’t until she was several paces away that Rose fully took note of her flowing white dress and deep teal shawl wrapped around her shoulders.

Nice shoes, but aren’t her toes cold? Rose thought, eyeing the woman’s strappy sandals.

She smirked to herself.

Adam was right, she was preoccupied with being cold.

Maybe she needed a couple days in Florida to shake off the chill that had clearly affected her brain.

Rushing back to the kitchen to hand off more orders, she nearly collided with Adam as he was exiting.

“Can you do me a favor?” She asked, steadying herself. “Could you bring a glass of water and a dinner menu to table eight?”

“Just one?”

“Yeah, she’s eating alone,” she said, moving past him. “Thank you.”

Before she could take a breath, Everly was whirling on her.

“Eighty-six the pork chops and the salmon,” she said, sweat beading at her hairline.

Rose faltered. “Seriously? We’ve never had to eighty-six anything before.”

“Business is booming,” Everly said, plating an entrée.

“This feels like a weird, great milestone,” she said. Tacking up the new orders and picking up several plates, Rose leaned across the prep

station. “Maybe we should get you some help in here.”

“Absolutely not. No one but me touches this stove.”

“Well, aren’t we a neurotically self-sufficient pair.”

Balancing everything on one arm, she left the kitchen and strode to the correct tables.

Adam lingered at table eight, nodding politely along with whatever she said to him.

But Rose could see the confusion in his eyes, the tension growing in his forehead as his dark brows drew together.

She must’ve been asking him about the menu. Or maybe directions around town. Adam was still learning street names, and even when he knew them, the other person rarely understood ASL.

Delivering everything to the correct guest, Rose hurried to his side to help.

“… Know this must be quite stressful,” she heard the woman say as she approached. “Aren’t you—”

“Hi again,” she interrupted cheerily. “Sorry about the wait.”

Sharp, bright eyes shifted to Rose and for a millisecond she wondered if this was how tiny fish felt when faced with an ocean predator.

“That’s alright,” she said, voice icy and clipped. “Your… employee was assisting me.”

Placing a hand on Adam’s forearm, Rose nodded that it was fine for him to make his exit.

He started to sign something but halted.

Looking to the woman once more, he searched her expression for something only he knew before finally turning to leave.

Rose steadied herself and began rattling off the dinner options and changes to the menu, asking if the woman had any allergies.

“Nothing with fish,” she said, eyeing her over the menu. “I can’t stomach it.”

“Not a problem,” Rose said. “I’ll let our chef know.”

After a moment, she ordered the winter green salad and an iced tea. As she handed the menu back, her gaze drifted past Rose, tracking something.

Or someone.

Turning, she saw who had her attention.

Adam was collecting used plates off a recently vacated table.

“Has he worked for you for very long?” The woman asked.

“Adam doesn’t really work here,” she explained. “I mean, he does, but he’s not—he’s just helping.”

“And why is that?”

Rose cocked her head. “You work for the labor union or something?”

Her cold demeanor cracked, exposing a sliver of embarrassment.

“I… I simply meant, I’m unaccustomed to people doing anything for free.”

“Adam just likes lending a hand,” she said with a smile. “He’s good like that.”

“That’s his name?” The woman’s stare flicked up to Rose, oddly probing. “Adam?”

The hair on the back of Rose’s neck stood up.

“Yes,” she forced out, refusing to divulge too much. “That’s his name.”

Her stare darkened, like low hanging clouds drifted across her gaze. But before Rose could fully register her mood shift, the woman blinked and flashed a tight smile.

“Well, he seems… Right at home.”

Rose’s feet moved without her giving the order, taking two steps back.

“I’ll just go ahead and put your order in,” she muttered. “And I’ll be back with your drink.”

She didn’t wait for the woman to respond.

Turning, she booked it for the kitchen, nearly elbowing a middle-aged man in the side as she passed him.

Her mind began supplying puzzle pieces, shifting them around and around, trying to form a picture she could comprehend.

Something about that woman was inherently alien.

And yet she felt undeniably familiar.

* * * * * * *

By eight o’clock, the Whittaker café had calmed. Only a few people remained, and the solo guitar could finally be heard over the chatter.

The woman in the teal shawl lingered, nursing her third iced tea like she’d never have another.

From the wait station, Rose spied on her, waiting for understanding to dawn.

Had she met her before?

Was she someone Rose had met at one of the countless business owner luncheons her dad convinced her to attend?

A tap on her shoulder made her jump.

“Sorry,” Adam signed. *“Are you hiding?”*

“Not exactly,” she said, pretending to stack rolls of silverware. “Are you?”

His stare bounced from her to the woman and then back.

“Kind of.” He cringed slightly. *“She makes me nervous.”*

Protectiveness flared to life inside Rose's chest, straightening her spine like a rod.

"Did she do something to you? Say something inappropriate?" She glared at the interloper. "I'll—"

Adam reached for her, shaking his head. *"No, no, she didn't. She just… asked me some weird questions."*

Rose frowned. "What do you mean by weird?"

"I think…" He tilted his head and shrugged. *"I think she thought I was someone else."*

"Do you think she knew you…" She gestured vaguely. "Before?"

"I don't know. She didn't say that she did." His gaze moved past her once more. *"But she stared at me like she expected something from me."*

Rose bit the inside of her cheek as her stomach churned.

She hadn't felt right since the woman had wandered into the Whittaker.

"Did I use the right words? Maybe my signing was off—"

"No, no, that's not it. You used the correct ones," she assured him. "I just…" She swallowed. "I don't like that she made you uncomfortable."

Warmth lit up his violet eyes. *"You worry about me too much."*

"Says who?"

"Derek," he answered honestly. *"And Everly, Zoey—"*

"Okay, okay, I get the picture," she interrupted, waving her hand. "I'm a killjoy worrywart."

"I don't know what that means, but I don't think you are," he signed. *"I like that you care about me so much."*

Jesus, had the heat cranked up to full blast? Rose flushed and was nearly sweating.

She couldn't argue though. He was right.

Someone is waiting for him to come home, her mind supplied. *Someone is already his.*

Clearing her throat, Rose backed up half a step and said, “I should go drop that woman’s check.”

Adam started to nod, but stalled, frowning over her shoulder.

“She’s gone.”

“What?”

Whipping her head around, she scanned the dining room.

The stranger had disappeared.

“Goddamn it,” she muttered, brushing past him.

If she had dined and dashed, Rose was going to—

Pulling up short at the now empty table, she stared at the empty glass, the neatly folded cloth napkin, and…

The pile of large coins left in the center.

Looking around as if she expected it all to be a prank, Rose waited for the punchline.

It never came.

“What…” She picked up one shining silver piece, turning it over in her hand.

It wasn’t American currency, or British from what she could tell. In fact, it didn’t resemble any coin she’d ever seen before.

The weight, however, was a good sign it was real silver. Beneath the top layer was another handful of gold coins, all similarly sized and without any indication of their country of origin.

Not wanting to draw attention to the heap of precious metal, Rose quickly scooped them up and slid them into her serving apron pocket.

As she started clearing off the table, she flipped the napkin open and stared at something even more bizarre than the coins.

Lines and lines of hieroglyphic-like symbols were written out—nearly two paragraphs worth—in ink on the material.

Squinting at each one, Rose tried to translate the message. It wasn't any language, dead or otherwise, that she'd ever seen.

At the bottom, in place of a signature, was a roughly curved line almost in the shape of an ocean wave.

Just like what Adam had drawn his last day in the hospital.

Rose blinked.

And blinked again.

What… the actual fuck.

* * * * * * *

Leaning his forearms against the tops of he knees, Adam stared at the grey rug between his bare feet.

The resounding quiet of the inn felt oppressive.

He'd been able to keep himself distracted with the constant flow of people, bussing tables, and taking food wherever Rose or Everly asked him to.

But here, alone in his room, his head was splitting from the silence.

And the questions.

You're not from here, are you? The woman with eyes the color of an icy tidepool had asked. *You seem different from the rest of them.*

Adam ran his palm over his jaw, noting the stubble growth. He hated shaving—the nicks, the burn, the smell of the white foam he used—but leaving the facial hair also felt… wrong.

Is your family close? Being away from them must hurt.

He hadn't known what to say in response, not that she'd understand ASL anyways. Most people didn't, he found.

Do you plan to stay in town?

He'd managed to sign back *'yes, I do. I like it here'* but when her eyes widened at his hand motions, and her fingers twitched oddly, Adam's stomach churned.

Something felt very, very wrong.

And yet, he felt like maybe… just maybe… he knew her.

He shook his head.

That wasn't likely. If she had, wouldn't she have greeted him as such? Wouldn't she have used his previous name? Asked where he'd been?

His head throbbed, draining his energy.

Adam had heard Rose talk about having a headache before. Now he knew why she scowled so deeply when she was afflicted by one.

Massaging his temples, he closed his eyes and inhaled deeply through his nose.

The swirling, inky void ever present at the back of his consciousness undulated as if it would spit out a recollection of value.

Yet nothing came.

The woman's aquamarine eyes flashed in his mind, along with the image of her hands.

Graceful, sure, strong—

The pounding in his head intensified, and he winced.

When the pain subsided, Adam lifted his gaze to the desk across from him, spotting the stack of stationary and pens.

He didn't know why, but he wanted to use them.

Not to write—he still struggled with what Everly called 'penmanship'—but he thought maybe, if he tried something else…

Standing, he grabbed the notepad and two pens and went back to sit cross legged on his bed.

The first few lines were shaky, but he carried on, lightly pulling the tip along the paper until a shape emerged.

And then another.

He continued, transferring the images in his head onto the flat white expanse.

Finally, after some time, the woman’s sharp stare and her long, pale fingers took up the majority of the paper.

Adam straightened, holding the stationary up to assess his work.

He smiled proudly to himself, and only then realized his headache was gone.

Chapter Eight

“Wait, wait, maybe a little higher,” Zoey said, lifting her arms further over her head.

Adam observed her before mirroring with his end of the green sparkly garland.

“That looks good to me,” she said. “Rose?”

Without looking up from the order forms she was filling out, Rose mumbled, “Yeah, sure.”

Zoey groaned. “It’s like you don’t even care.”

“I do care,” she said, flipping the page. “About holidays that actually matter.”

“Don’t let dad and Derek hear you say that.”

“They just like it ‘cause it’s a day dedicated to getting hammered and eating potatoes.” Her gaze flicked up. “Only one of those things you’re allowed to participate in.”

“So? It’s still fun,” Zoey said. “Mom’s turned the house into a leprechaun dreamland.”

Rose didn’t doubt that, since the decorations her sister was currently tossing all around the Whittaker were leftovers her mother couldn’t find room for.

Frankly, she never appreciated the cultural stereotypes Saint Patrick’s Day brought, but she’d never turn down a properly poured Guinness, so it was a fine line to walk.

“Hand me the tape?” Zoey asked Adam from her perch on the step stool.

Doing so, Adam leaned his shoulder into the wall next to the banister, slipping his free hand into his pocket.

Resting her pen on another line of her paper, Rose found herself perilously distracted by the shift of muscle beneath his heather grey Henley.

Adam wasn't a bulky body builder type, but his strength was constantly on display with all the tasks he handled daily. Lifting heavy crates, stacking impossible amounts of dishware into the bussing bin, hauling laundry bags out to the service truck that came each Monday—he did all of it and barely broke a sweat.

Her gaze dropped to where his hand was still tucked inside his pocket, and the tapered angle of his waist.

He must've been a swimmer before this, she thought. *He's clearly built for it.*

Vaguely, she wondered if there would be any kind of swim team registry she could search in case his name and picture were listed.

As Zoey finished hanging the last of the gaudy plastic, Adam's attention drifted to the front desk.

No, to Rose.

His violet eyes sparkled, and a knowing smirk tugged at the corner of his lips.

Crap. He knew she'd been staring.

Cheeks heating, Rose ducked, making a poor attempt at looking nonchalant.

"Okay, we're done with the garland," Zoey announced, hopping off the step stool. "Mom also sent over little table toppers."

"Little what?"

Reaching into a bag, Zoey pulled out a fuzzy green shamrock on a spring attached to a weighted base.

"See? And they bobble." She demonstrated, plucking the end of the shamrock and watching it bounce.

“The height of sophistication,” Rose muttered, rolling her eyes. “Leave them there. I’ll put them out.”

“I’ll do it,” Adam signed.

Yanking the elastic out of his ponytail, his silken black hair tumbled over his shoulders in waves.

She didn’t get to see it down very often—only at night before he went to bed—and she swore it looked even softer and healthier than hers.

Rose gripped her pen so tight the plastic creaked.

“Uh… Okay. Sure,” she said, unable to articulate much else.

Adam smiled, raking his fingers up through his hair.

As he did so, the hem of his shirt lifted, flashing several inches of his smooth, muscled abdomen, and Rose was surprised her pen didn’t snap in half in her hand.

“Maybe you were a model,” Zoey blurted out, staring at him with teen doe eyes. “Like for shampoo or something.”

Adam tilted his head in thought.

“I don’t know what a m-o-d-e-l is,” he signed. *“But maybe. Is their job fun?”*

Zoey chuckled. “I think that depends on who you talk to.”

Gathering up another bag of bright green kitsch, she strolled into the dining room with Adam trailing her slowly.

Glancing at Rose, he smiled. *“Do you think I could be a model?”*

If he were anyone else, she would have thought he was fishing for a compliment.

But if Adam was anything, he was earnest.

“Yes,” she answered honestly. “But I’m not sure you have the temperament for it.”

“Is that a good thing?”

“Very,” she said with a smirk.

Before he crossed into the dining room, Adam’s gaze flicked over her, and the spark in his eyes intensified.

“Then I’m glad I’m not one,” he signed, and wandered off to find Zoey.

Rose took a deep breath, held it for two beats, and then released it through pursed lips.

She wasn’t sure how he managed to make everything toe the line between innocent and flirtatious, but it was wreaking havoc on her nervous system.

Glancing over her shoulder to make sure he wasn’t lingering, Rose set her pen down and pulled open the bottom desk drawer.

She’d done her best to hide the bundle underneath miscellaneous papers and stacks of Post-Its. Not that she was worried about anyone stealing it, but… Well, she just wasn’t sure how to treat it all.

Was it evidence? Was it a clue? Was it nonsense?

Withdrawing the wrapped cloth, she carefully unfolded it in her lap.

The strange coins shifted against each other, clinking together as they caught the light.

Definitely solid metal, she’d decided. Maybe they were plated with silver and gold, but they weren’t fakes.

She’d spent hours Googling both the odd shapes stamped into the coins and the symbols scrawled across the napkin but nothing even remotely matched.

She’d found several blog posts about pirate treasure and the lost city of Atlantis though.

Not exactly the help she was looking for.

And she could never tell Zoey about it all. Her sister would go blue in the face telling her it must be mermaids.

Shaking her head, Rose flipped one of the silver coins over in her hand, examining the odd figure in the center.

It looked like octopus tentacles curling into a knot.

Or a whirlpool.

“Okay, here is the *final*, final menu for Saint Patrick’s Day,” Everly said as she rounded the corner. “Sorry I kept making changes, I just—” She stopped as soon as she saw the pile of coins in Rose’s lap. “What on earth is that?”

“I, uh…” She fumbled, trying to wrap everything back up.

It was no use.

Sighing, Rose held up a silver piece. “Have any experience with unknown currency?”

“Not really…” Moving closer, Everly took it from her. “Where did you find this stuff?”

“A customer left all of it a couple nights ago,” Rose whispered, gesturing to the heap of money. “And a note but it’s not in any language I’ve ever seen.”

Spreading the napkin out on the desk blotter, she pushed the coins to the side so Everly could see the lines of writing.

“Whoa, what is this?” Her friend asked, leaning down to squint at the ink markings. “Runes or something?”

“I have no idea,” Rose said. “I looked everywhere online, but nothing really fit.”

Everly made a soft contemplative noise at the back of her throat, rereading the odd lines of writing.

“Any thoughts?”

Tilting her head, Everly glanced up. “Yeah, but you’re not going to like it.”

“Don’t.”

“I just think—”

“Everly, you’re better than this.”

“We shouldn’t negate the possibility—”

Rose flipped the corner of the napkin, covering the cryptic note, and scowled.

“Are you seriously going to look me in the eyes and say you think this is a *mermaid language*?”

A clattering noise from the dining room made them both jump, and Rose scrambled to wrap the coins in the linen and shove it all back into the desk drawer.

“Rose, can we put these stickers on your windows?” Zoey called.

“Sure, yeah, do whatever you want,” she said, hoping it would keep them in the other room.

When her sister didn’t wander into the lobby, Rose exhaled roughly.

Everly made a placating gesture as she said, “You have to admit, this adds a lot of tallies into the ‘extra weird’ column.”

“You really believe Adam’s a mermaid?” She furrowed her brow. “Er, merman.”

The expression on her face did nothing to soothe Rose’s nerves.

“I’m not shoving him in a tank and calling him Ariel if that’s what you mean,” Everly said. “I just… think maybe there’s more out there than we know. And you have to admit, his entire story is beyond crazy.”

Rose flattened her lips into a hard line. “So is the story Bernard down at the post office tells about his three day weekend in Milwaukee, but you don’t see me pointing fingers and calling him one of Santa’s elves.”

“Well that’s because nothing he did would ever qualify as being in the Christmas Spirit,” Everly said with a chuckle.

Sighing, Rose pressed her fingers into the corners of her eyes, hoping to alleviate the sudden headache she was stricken with.

“What did Adam say when you showed him the note?”

She stilled. “Uh… well…”

“You didn’t tell him?”

Lifting her head, she said, “I didn’t know how. That woman made him nervous and was asking a lot of questions. I can’t imagine being told she also left an indecipherable message and freaking pirate doubloons would make him feel any better.”

“For the record, those weren’t doubloons,” Everly said, pointing to the drawer the coins were hidden in. “Furthermore, don’t you think he has a right to know?”

“A right to know what?” Rose waved a hand out. “A strange woman paid for her dinner in gold and silver? If she knew Adam—knew him before his accident—wouldn’t she have said something?”

Everly chewed the corner of her bottom lip in thought. “Maybe she was in shock? Or expected him to remember her?”

“Adam didn’t remember how to tie his laces until a week ago,” she said. “If he’s that important to her, she should have said something.”

Decerning hazel eyes regarded her in silence for a beat too long.

“I know you’re protective of Adam,” Everly murmured finally. “And I’m not saying you shouldn’t be, but maybe this is something he does actually need to be looped in on.”

Shit.

She was right.

Rose hated that she was right.

“Okay, fine,” she relented. “But not until I get a chance to call Jimmy down at the station and ask if anyone’s filed a missing person’s report. He said he’d keep me updated but I’ve seen how he does paperwork, and it isn’t exactly reassuring.”

Smiling, Everly patted her shoulder. “Sounds like a plan.”

Another clatter from the dining room was followed by a shocked laugh, and Rose tipped her head back to groan at the ceiling.

“My windows are going to look like I let a kindergarten class loose in there, aren’t they?”

“Oh yeah. Without a doubt.”

“Great.”

* * * * * * *

Just as he pulled a clean white tee shirt over his head, a knock sounded at Adam’s door.

Checking the clock on his nightstand, he smiled.

Rose was early. She was almost never early—always kept busy for an extra few minutes each evening as she finished confirming reservations or cleaning up the dining area before Lex got in.

Hurrying to answer, he twisted the knob so forcefully he nearly broke the thing off in his hand.

“Hi,” Rose said, holding two mugs of hot chocolate in her hands. “Is now a good time?”

Nodding, he signed, *“Of course. Come in.”*

Their nightly ASL study sessions had become the best part of his day.

Each time, he could feel the nervous tension bleed a little more out of Rose. Could feel her walls come down, one stone at a time.

He knew if he was patient, she’d let him in eventually.

And Adam wasn't in any hurry.

Taking one of the mugs from her, he smiled. *"Thank you."*

"I accidentally put a little too much cocoa powder in here, so you might want to taste it before you thank me," she said.

Staring into the rapidly melting marshmallows, he took a large sip.

Whoa. That was…

Well, he didn't hate it.

"Is it okay?" She asked.

Adam nodded, and just to prove it to her, he took another sip.

As Rose set up her tablet and pulled up a video lesson, he settled on the foot of the bed, crisscrossing his legs and propping up on his elbows.

The woman on the screen started talking—an intro they'd practically memorized by now—and Rose took a seat next to him, keeping her usual distance.

He glanced over at her, studying her profile.

Something was wrong.

Adam tapped her elbow to get her attention. *"Are you okay?"*

Blinking, she flashed a tight smile and forced her posture to straighten. "Yeah, everything's fine."

He tilted his head, gently questioning her answer.

Rose wasn't a very good liar.

After a moment, she said, "I'm just tired. It was a long day."

He wanted to ask what happened, if there was anything he could do to help, but the video shifted to the ASL signs they were studying, so Adam let it go.

Watching the hands on screen, he repeated the movements with ease.

Maybe he'd known this before his accident. It would explain why his fingers recreated signs smoothly and he committed them to memory quickly.

Rose, however, was struggling.

"Damn it," she muttered, retrying the same sign for the fourth time.

The video continued but she still tried to perfect the previous motion.

They watched as words became phrases and sentences, and Adam continued practicing.

Rose sighed quietly, letting her hands drop.

Frowning, he turned and tapped her arm again.

"You're not having fun," he signed.

"It's not…" She shook her head. "I'm okay. I'm just not as fast of a learner as you."

He searched her face, noting the shadows forming under her pale blue eyes.

Adam had caught onto the fact that when anyone was tired, they didn't think as clearly. He was the same—often mixing up his shampoo and face wash in the shower at the end of the day.

Leaning forward, he picked up the tablet and found the red button on the screen that made the video pause.

"What are you doing?" Rose asked.

The corner of his mouth twitched. *"I think we should take a break."*

"Adam, I—"

"We can study more tomorrow," he signed, setting the tablet aside. *"Let's watch TV instead."*

She rolled her eyes, but a smile curved her lips. "Fine, but only because I know you're addicted to Great British Bake Off."

Scooting back up the bed, Adam grabbed the remote from the nightstand and adjusted the pillows so he was propped up against the headboard.

He didn't miss the way Rose scanned the length of his body as he stretched out, and heat pooled in his belly like it usually did when he thought about her.

Patting the mattress next to him, he grinned.

"You're ridiculous," she murmured, but her tone was fond.

As she settled in at his left, Adam held the remote out for her.

Seconds later, familiar music was playing and the hosts appeared on screen.

The challenges were explained and the contestants got to work preparing their desserts, but Adam barely registered anything happening.

He was too distracted by the warmth radiating from Rose, and her light, floral scent he didn't have a name for but loved all the same.

"Sorry I couldn't keep up today," she murmured, tugging at the sleeve of her black sweater.

Shaking his head, he signed, *"There's nothing to be sorry for."*

"Hm."

Angling to catch her eye, he smiled. *"You're too hard on yourself."*

Rose let out a short laugh. "I'm a recovering perfectionist," she said. "I just know how important these lessons are, and—"

He cut her off with a gentle tap on her knee. *"The lessons help, but I care about spending time with you more."*

She went wholly still, and Adam started to worry he'd said something wrong.

It was so easy to tell her how he felt, he often forgot she rarely reacted in kind.

He watched the column of her throat work in the echoing silence, and his stomach clenched.

"You don't like it when I say things like that, do you?" He signed, glancing away.

Rose shifted on the duvet. "It's not that I don't like it. I just… don't know what to say."

The discomfort in his stomach intensified, and he had the strangest urge to hide.

Maybe he should learn to keep more of this thoughts to himself…

"I'm not used to people being so open and sincere," she continued, looking over at him. "Not everyone wears their heart on their sleeve like you do, Adam."

Confused, he dropped his stare to his shirt sleeve and then to hers.

Rose chuckled. "It's a metaphor. It means being vulnerable and honest. You're unafraid to tell people how you feel."

"Why would I be afraid of feelings?"

"That is a question millions of therapists try to help people answer," she said. "And make a ton of money doing it."

Adam wasn't sure what a therapist was, but he figured he'd like them if they helped people.

"It's harder for me," Rose admitted quietly. "You don't remember your past, but I remember mine. I think I remember it too much." She glanced down at her hands in her lap. "It makes me nervous to…"

"Feel?"

"Well, yeah." She nodded. "I think I'm just always waiting for the other shoe to drop."

Adam furrowed his brow. *"What shoe?"*

“It’s another metaphor, sorry,” she said, waving her hand. “I just meant—”

Rose bit her words off, tired eyes lifting to his.

“Adam, the woman from the other night… the one who made you nervous,” she started, turning towards him more. “Do you think you could have known her? Or maybe she knew you?”

He shrugged. *“I don’t know. She didn’t say she knew who I was.”*

“Yeah, but…” Rose bit her lip. “She left something a bit strange. I think it was meant for you.”

Surprise pulled at his features. *“What did she leave?”*

“A note,” she said. “But I couldn’t read it.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s not written in any language I know. Or that I’ve seen, for that matter.”

A chill skipped up Adam’s spine, curling its way into the back of his skull and tugging at the ever-present inky void.

“That is strange,” he signed, blinking away the shock.

Rose nodded, fidgeting with her fingertips. “If it is for you, and she knew you before…” Her swallow was audible. “That means you have a life to get back to, Adam. You can’t—”

He stopped her by taking her hands in his, twisting to face her fully.

Staring into her eyes, he waited a full three beats before releasing her.

“No one has come for me, Rose,” he signed. *“Even if that note is for me, even if that woman knew me, no one has claimed me.”* He held her gaze as he added, *“You claimed me.”*

“Adam—”

“You came for me,” he continued. *“When I was scared and alone, you were there.”*

She frowned slightly. “When you washed up on shore?”

“At the hospital,” he signed. *“There were so many people around, asking questions I couldn’t answer. I felt lost, and then…”* He smiled. *“You came into my room. You talked to me like I mattered, like what I wanted was important. You weren’t afraid like I was.”*

Her pink lips parted, and he valiantly fought the urge to press his own against them.

Adam didn’t remember kissing anyone before, but he knew he’d happily leave those memories at the bottom of the abyss if it meant he could kiss Rose.

“Everything got better because of you,” he signed, stare never leaving hers. *“I’ve been here two weeks, and every day is more beautiful than the last because of you.”*

Rose inhaled sharply—not quite a gasp, but close to it.

“You were brave for me then,” Adam signed, smiling at her. *“I’ll be brave for you now.”*

“I don’t think I can…” She started to shake her head. “I just want us to be sure.”

Adam grinned. *“I am sure.”*

“I meant, that you don’t have people waiting for you.”

Pressing his lips together, he searched her face. He felt like they were talking in circles.

If he couldn’t remember his past, she would never trust any talk about the future.

“Show me,” he signed. *“Show me the note that woman left.”*

Rose blinked in surprise.

“Let’s see if it jogs my memory.”

* * * * * * *

Spreading the cloth napkin out on Adam’s duvet, Rose shifted the coins in her hand, the light clinking the only noise in the room.

She could barely breathe as she studied his expression.

Leaning over the mystery note, he gently touched the curving ink of the first symbol, jaw set tight and brow furrowed.

“I looked up every language I could think of,” she said, needing to break the silence. “Even dead ones. I couldn’t find anything that fit.”

Adam lifted his gaze to hers, violet irises gleaming even brighter.

“These coins don’t match any known currency either,” she continued, opening her palm.

He tilted his head to look. *“What is that in the middle?”*

Rose sighed. “I think it’s… an octopus.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s a—well, it’s not a fish, but it lives in the ocean,” she explained. “It has eight tentacles and it’s kind of squishy.”

Adam made an amused noise at the back of his throat, lips twitching.

“I don’t know, I’m not a marine biologist,” she said with a shrug. Dropping the coins on the bed, she added, “Maybe these are from Atlantis after all.”

“Is that a country?”

“No, it’s a myth.”

Adam shook his head. *“You’re not making much sense.”*

“Sorry.” Sitting on the edge of the mattress, she fidgeted with her hands. “If it makes you feel any better, I’m just as confused as you are.”

Smiling softly, his attention returned to the note.

His stare traced every marking, every dot, every ink blotch.

Recognition never lit up his eyes.

"If I knew what these meant, I don't anymore," he signed finally. *"They're… interesting though."*

Rose let out a short laugh. "That's one way to describe them."

"Can I…" He looked up at her. *"Can I keep this?"*

"Sure," she said, ignoring the unease creeping down her neck. "I don't see why not."

Scooping up the coins, she placed one in the center of the napkin.

"Just in case," she added with a shrug.

Adam smiled, rolling the coin between his fingers.

Telling him she was just going to put the others pieces of gold and silver back safely and that she'd be right back, Rose ducked out of the room.

She didn't put them in the desk drawer, however.

Instead, Rose hurried to her cottage, fumbling in the dark as she searched for the spare key under her potted plant.

She didn't bother turning on a light as she strode to her tiny living room and knelt next to her coffee table.

Pulling a small keepsake box out, she made room amongst the photos, postcards, and trinkets, and dropped the foreign coins to the bottom.

Closing the lid, she shoved it back under the table and paused.

Someone's going to come for him, her thoughts echoed. *He won't stay.*

Fishing her phone out of her pocket, Rose took a deep, aching breath and dialed a number she'd saved two weeks ago.

"Uh, hi, this is Rose McCleary," she said into the speaker. "Can I leave a message for Jimmy—I mean, Officer Burns?"

The desk clerk sounded bored but amenable as she started typing.

“I just wanted to check in to see if anyone filed a missing person’s report for the John Doe that washed up on shore,” she said.

“Okay,” the clerk muttered. “Has anyone contacted you about him?”

Rose straightened her spine, staring into the shadows swallowing her living room.

“No,” she said. “No one’s come looking for him.”

Chapter Nine

Staring up at her ceiling, Rose begged her body to relax enough to drift back to sleep.

It's four-fifty in the morning. Just… C'mon, two more hours. ***One*** *more hour. Anything.*

Closing her eyes, she waited…

And waited.

Lolling her head to one side, checked the time on her phone.

Four-fifty-three.

"Great," she muttered, dropping her cell onto the pillow next to her.

If she held her breath, she could hear the ocean waves crashing on the shore.

Tossing the blankets back, she climbed out of bed, stretching as she made her way to the bathroom.

She was dressed for a run in record time, tightening her laces and grabbing her reflective vest off the hook by her door.

The early spring air was a chilled shock that cleared all the grogginess from her head.

Stars scattered across the dark sky like tiny holes punched in construction paper. Rose searched for Orion, the Big Dipper, Venus midway along the horizon. She traced their patterns over and over as she ran, letting her feet take her where her heart wanted to be.

Deviating from her route along sidewalks and residential streets, she cut through the beach access parking lot and jogged up the wooden boardwalk over the dunes towards the beach.

Her mother hated the beach at night. Always complained it reminded her of the opening scene from *Jaws*, causing her to imagine all the deadly creatures waiting in the surf to tear people limb from limb.

Rose had a very different visceral response.

It was like coming home alone. Quiet, dark, and vulnerable given how secluded everything was.

It was the breath and the pause, between one state of being and the next.

Slowing her pace through the loose sand, she continued straight towards the water until her footing was better. Her speed increased with every passing second.

Going left, she raced herself along the shore, staring out at the black waters lapping closer and closer. Once she made it to the rocky outcropping that signaled land's end, she looped back.

Memories played on the projector screen of her mind.

Everything got better because of you, Adam's hands signed.

But it was Pete's voice repeating the words as he got down on one knee.

Rose's left ring finger ached with the phantom pain of tearing the gold band off.

You lied to me, her voice screamed in her head.

Her Nikes pounded the damp sand, kicking up debris behind her.

You're always somewhere else—

What are you talking about? I'm right here!

Adam's frown and windswept hair replaced Pete's scowl.

You spend a lot of time with me, but you stay away, he signed. *You're distant.*

Reaching the other end of the long stretch of beach, Rose tagged one of the large granite boulders covered in tangled seaweed and spun around for another lap.

*Even when you're with me, even when we're alone, you're never actually **here**,* Pete's voice overlayed on top of images from her walk on that same beach with Adam. *You haven't been in a long, long time.*

Her chest burned.

*So you're blaming my **business** for this?*

We weren't like this before you bought the inn.

You are such a bastard!

Slowing momentarily to catch her breath, Rose stared out at the oceanic void—the starry sky bleeding into the waves.

Adam's jet black hair framed his face as he signed, *You were brave for me then.*

She remembered brushing her own scarlet strands out of her eyes. She'd had bangs then.

How long have you been sleeping with her, Pete?

Don't do this, don't make it worse—

How long?!

…Four months.

The echoing gut punch forced her into motion again.

Every breath scraped her throat.

Rose smacked her palm on the algae-slick rock, whirling on a dime.

Get out.

Please, Rose, I want to fix this.

I don't. I want you gone.

Faster.

She needed to run faster.

Her pulse thundered in her ears, drowning out the rush of waves hitting the shore.

I'll be brave for you now, Adam's graceful hands signed in her mind.

Like a stopper had been yanked from deep inside her, all the adrenaline, all the fight drained out of her body.

Gulping the cold salt air, she planted her hands on her hips as she walked the rest of the way to the end of the beach.

I love you, Rose, Pete's voice bounced inside her skull. *I love you. I love you. I love y—*

A primal scream rushed up her throat, threatening to split her and the sky in half.

Clamping her jaw down so tight it nearly cracked a molar, Rose bent at the waist, breathing in the pungent smell of low tide until her esophagus burned and hot tears flowed down her cheeks.

I'll be brave for you now.

The sounds of her choked sobs were swallowed by the sea.

Righting herself, she didn't bother to wipe the evidence of her grief from her face.

It was just saltwater returning to its greatest source.

Facing the horizon, Rose watched the clouds turn a soft shade of lavender and didn't turn away until the waves lapped over the toes of her shoes.

* * * * * * *

The crunch of pea gravel announced her arrival before Adam could see her.

Peeking through the gap in the curtains, he waited.

As soon as Rose came into view, his heart sank.

Her shoulders slumped and her head hung down in a way he'd never seen before.

Adam had heard her leave for a run earlier than normal, and when she took much longer to return, he knew something was wrong.

The sorrow that weighed down her every step was just confirmation.

As she followed the path up to her cottage and disappeared between the barely-budding hedges, Adam leaned away from the glass pane.

Something had upset Rose. Something had hurt her feelings so badly she couldn't sleep.

Glancing around his dimly lit room, he silently fretted, running his fingers through his hair.

Rose didn't like discussing her feelings, and if he went to her now, she'd probably feel ambushed.

Ideas rolled around in his head but none of them stuck until…

His lips twitched.

The only thing he knew that consistently made her happier was just a few paces away.

Adam's hand was on his doorknob before he remembered he should probably put on a shirt.

And shoes.

Redressing quickly, he craned his neck to look out the window once more, scanning the pathway.

She wasn't out of her cottage yet.

He still had time.

* * * * * * *

Adjusting the top button of her cream colored blouse, Rose gathered up her keys, iPad, and planner before stepping out her front door.

Her whole body ached—from her lengthy run, from the lack of sleep, from the intense purging of grief that had continued under the spray of her scalding hot shower.

She hadn’t even started work yet and she was already looking forward to slipping back beneath her covers.

Just as she shut her door and turned to lock it, something caught her attention from the corner of her eye.

Doing a double take, she frowned.

Placed on the corner of her worn welcome mat, was a to-go cup from the inn. Steam escaped the tiny opening in the lid, curling upwards invitingly.

She picked it up, examining it fully.

No note. Nothing written on the side.

Sniffing it, she decided it wasn’t likely poisoned, unless Everly had been harboring a grudge for the past sixteen years.

Locking her door, she took a sip of piping hot liquid and gagged.

“Oh, Jesus, what—” Rose pressed her fingers to her lips.

It was the most offensive cup of coffee she’d ever tasted in her life. She wasn’t even sure it could qualify as coffee so much as acidic, jet fuel soaked sludge.

She was convinced whoever made this had no tastebuds whatsoever.

Striding up the path, past the privacy hedges, the masochistic side of Rose reared its head and she took another sip.

Grimacing, she shook her head like she’d been slapped.

“This coffee should be against the Geneva Convention,” she muttered, glaring down at the plastic lid.

Halfway through mentally scripting how she was going to ask Everly if she’d been sleepwalking while she made the coffee, realization dawned on her.

Everly hadn’t made it at all.

And despite the fact that the contents of her cup could strip paint, Rose didn't have the heart to pour it out behind the shrubs.

Maybe if I add some sugar and flavored creamer… She thought, pushing open the employee entrance. *Fuck it, maybe some whiskey in there too.*

"Morning, Rose," Lex greeted. "You just missed Adam. I think he went back to the kitchen for something."

Flashing a crooked smile, she said, "I have a feeling I know what for."

Setting her iPad and planner down on the desk, she told Lex she'd only be a couple minutes and then they could head out.

"Hey, uh, are you…" Lex faltered, scanning her face. "Feeling okay?"

So her concealer hadn't done as good of a job as she'd hoped. Great.

Rose tilted her head noncommittally. "Just a rough night. I'll be okay."

Before Lex could question her, she hurried into the café with her horrible coffee in hand.

Waving to a few locals she knew and saying good morning to their new seasonal server hire, she made her way to the kitchen door.

She paused at the sound of Everly's voice on the other side.

"I think that would be really nice. Listen, Rose is my best friend, but even I know—"

One of the patrons knocked their cup against a plate, and the clatter drowned out whatever Everly said.

Furrowing her brow, Rose leaned in, nearly pressing her ear to the door jam.

"You certainly can't go wrong for trying," Everly continued.

What the hell was she talking about?

She laughed. “You’re right about that. I think she was born with ‘stubborn’ stamped on the bottom of her foot.”

Swallowing the offended noise at the back of her throat, Rose continued to eavesdrop.

“N-no, I didn’t mean literally,” Everly said. “It was… you know what, never mind.”

Rolling her eyes, Rose decided she’d heard enough.

Shoving open the kitchen door, she tried not to look pleased as both Everly and Adam jolted.

“Good morning,” she said, pretending to be oblivious.

Adam faced her, smiling a little sheepishly.

“How are you?” He asked, gaze flicking to Everly for a beat.

“Fine,” she said. “How are you?”

He nodded. *“Good.”*

“Good.”

“I’m good too,” Everly volunteered, fiddling with her apron.

Awkward silence permeated the room, but Rose refused to yield.

When Adam’s gaze dropped to the paper cup still in her hand, his smile warmed and his violet eyes sparkled.

His expression alone was exactly why she hadn’t dumped it.

“Are you hungry?” Everly asked, hurrying to the stove. “I just got in some new pepperjack cheese. I can make western omelets.”

Rose shook her head. “Maybe later.”

Inching away from the prep station, Adam searched her face.

She braced for questioning.

What was wrong? Why does she look so tired? Is everything alright?

Instead, gave a gentle nod before signing, *“I’ll go refill drinks in the café.”*

“You don’t have to—” Everly started to argue.

He just shook his head and smiled. *“I want to.”*

As he strode past, Rose caught his scent… and the faintest hint of burnt coffee.

Knew it.

She waited for the door to swing back into place before looking to her friend.

Everly’s resolve crumbled like stale bread. “You heard us talking, didn’t you?”

“Sure did,” Rose said, popping the lid off her cup and grabbing the sugar canister.

“Okay, before you get mad—”

“I’m not mad.”

“Well, you have mad face.”

“I always have mad face. I come from a family of deep frowners.”

Setting aside the eggs she was whisking, Everly circled the prep table. “We weren’t gossiping about you.”

“I figured that,” Rose said, adding as much cream as she could manage into her coffee. “For one, Adam wouldn’t know how to gossip if you wrote him step by step instructions. And two, you’re not that mean.”

“He was just… asking about you.”

Rose dropped a wooden stir stick into her cup. “Why does that feel worse?”

“Not in a bad way,” Everly reassured. “He wanted to know if there were things you liked—things he could do—”

“*Everly.*”

“Not like that!” Her head cocked to the side. “Although…”

“Okay, I’m leaving,” Rose said, turning towards the door.

Everly stopped her with a gentle tug on the arm.

“Wait, wait, really. Adam could just sense you were… sad—”

“Mad, bad, sad…” She tested her heavily doctored coffee and tried not to wrinkle her nose. “This is a regular Sesame Street episode.”

“Well, are you?”

Rose stared at her friend. “Am I what?”

“Sad,” Everly murmured, empathy flooding her gaze.

It took all her waning energy not to crumple right there on the kitchen floor.

Forcing her spine to turn into iron, Rose took a deep breath.

“I just… wish I could forget about that night.”

“What night?” Everly’s eyes widened. “Oh, *that* night.” She winced.

“It plays on a loop in my head, over and over,” Rose said. “The worst night of my life repeating like episodes of Big Bang Theory on the TV in the doctor’s office. It just—” She swallowed to keep her voice from cracking. “It just doesn’t help things, you know? I feel haunted.”

Reaching for her, Everly gave her forearm a gentle squeeze.

Before she could speak, the kitchen door swung open.

“Hey Rose?” Lex glanced between them hesitantly. “Sorry to interrupt but the police are here.”

“What?” Setting her cup aside, she hurried to follow Lex back into the lobby.

“I don’t think anything’s wrong,” Lex murmured. “But he wanted to talk to you and Adam.”

Rose’s stomach twisted, threatening to send that terrible coffee right back up.

In his crisp deputy uniform, Jimmy hovered by the lobby television, watching the morning traffic report while Adam lingered at his side.

“Morning, Jimmy,” she called, hoping she looked calmer than she felt.

“Oh, hey, Rose,” he said, tearing his eyes away from the screen. “Bet you’re glad you don’t have to commute on the Zakim, huh?”

Blinking, she tried to catch up. “Oh, uh, yeah. Sure am. So what’s up?”

Adam faced her, violet eyes rimmed with worry.

“I got your message,” Jimmy said, pulling a few folded papers from his back pocket. “No one’s made a report in our area, but I called a few other precincts to see if they had any Missing Persons reports. We got a couple that fit John D—I mean, Adam’s description, so I thought I’d come down myself to see if we’ve got an ID.”

Her heart plummeted.

Meeting Adam’s stare, she nodded once and braced herself for the inevitable.

Waving Adam over to stand under better light, Jimmy held up the first picture.

The man in the photo looked similar, but the nose was all wrong.

The second was too short.

The third was off by about fifteen years.

And the fourth…

The fourth was close. Eerily close. But before Jimmy could suggest it might be a match, he read the other physical markers underneath the photo and snorted.

“Nope, not this guy either,” he told them. “Says here he’s missing his right leg below the knee.”

Adam looked down, rocking on the heels of both feet.

"He doesn't have any prosthetics," Rose said, trying not to smile.

"Yeah, I remember from the hospital," Jimmy said, folding the papers back up. "Well, it was worth a shot. Sorry for the interruption."

"No problem. Thanks for coming all the way out," she said as he started towards the Whittaker entrance. "Keep us posted on anything else."

"Will do," he said with a wave. "Have a good day, you two."

And just like that, her heart was back where it belonged—beating firmly and rapidly behind her sternum.

If she wasn't mistaken, Adam was just as relieved.

"You called him?" He signed after a quiet beat.

"Yeah, I thought it was a good idea to ask… Just in case."

"You didn't tell him about the note that woman left. Or the coins."

Rose faltered. "I… I didn't… It just seemed unnecessary…"

Searching her face, a mischievous grin curved Adam's lips.

"Okay," he signed, taking slow strides towards the dining area. *"If you say so."*

He didn't need to verbalize it. She already knew, even if she couldn't admit it.

She didn't bring it up because she didn't want anything to come of it.

She didn't *want* Adam to leave.

"I'm going to help Everly in the kitchen," he signed. *"If you need me."*

Rose almost thought she hallucinated the heated glimmer in his eye as he walked past.

Almost.

When he was out of the lobby, she finally took a breath. Crossing her arms, she glanced up at the stuffed swordfish above the mantle and released it on a sigh.

Chapter Ten

Walking into the inn at eight o'clock in the morning usually meant Rose was greeted by a soft and friendly 'good morning' from Lex, perhaps an early rising guest reading a book or pamphlet in the lobby, or even Everly at the desk grabbing more order forms.

Rarely did she see her brother, and even rarer did she slam into him face first, almost knocking him off a ladder.

First time for everything though.

"Oh, God—"

"Jesus, Mary, and Joe—"

"What on—"

"Rose!"

Grabbing him by the front of his work vest, she tried to counter-balance while the ladder rocked underneath him, and Derek threw a hand up against the wall.

"Derek, what the hell?" She exclaimed when she was certain he wasn't in dire risk of getting a concussion.

"I should ask you the same thing," he said, staring down at her. "You can let go of me now."

"Not until you tell me what you're doing up there."

Derek tapped the emergency exit sign with his screwdriver. "This went out last night. Everly texted me. And while I'm at it, I'm going to check all your smoke detectors."

"Don't you have a real job to get to?" Rose said, releasing her hold on him and crossing her arms.

"Fire safety *is* a real job," he said, eyeing her from under the brim of his Red Sox ballcap.

Smirking, she said, “And you’re avoiding your client in Marblehead.”

Derek inhaled like he was going to argue only to sigh heartily. “And I’m avoiding my client in Marblehead.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

“And you have zero spatial awareness.”

Turning away, Rose headed down the hall towards the front desk. “At least I’m not afraid of a rich old white lady.”

“Hey, I resent that.” The sound of a screwdriver on metal was followed immediately by, “Grab me a muffin, would you?”

“Get your own,” she tossed over her shoulder. Smiling as she entered the lobby, she added, “Good morning, Lex. How are you this morning?”

Wide hazel eyes met hers. “Um. I have to tell you something.”

Rose halted in her tracks. “Did something happen? Are you okay?”

Nodding, Lex waved her closer. “I’m fine,” they whispered. “But I think…”

She couldn’t breathe as she waited for them to finish their sentence.

“I think we have a bat.”

Well, this was a first too.

“What? Really?”

“I think so,” they said, glancing over their shoulder. “I heard something flapping around in the dining room last night, but I couldn’t see it and this morning…”

Craning her neck to look into the café, Rose tried desperately not to shudder. “Is it still in there?”

“I don’t know,” Lex said, wringing their hands. “And not knowing is somehow creepier than knowing.”

Cursing under her breath, she stepped around the desk, eyes glued to the ceiling.

By some miracle—and probably because a lot of the local restaurants were open for the spring season and offering breakfast—none of the guests were eating in the café.

Yet.

Inching into the room, she slowly scanned the crown molding, looking for any small, furry, brown anomaly. Then she dropped her gaze to the built-in lighting fixtures—the hanging lights and sconces on the walls.

Something dark and oblong was pressed against the frosted glass shade on the far wall. Something bat shaped.

A firm tap on her arm had Rose screaming and jumping halfway out of her skin, whirling around.

Adam's eyes went as wide as dinner plates and he ducked—Oh, to dodge her violently swatting hands.

"What's wrong?"

Rose clamped a hand over her mouth.

"You scared the shit out of me," she hissed.

"What's going on? Why did you scream?"

Pushing at his chest, she quickly backed them both out of the café.

"We might have a little furry friend in there."

"A what?"

"A bat," she whispered.

"Oh…" Adam shook his head. *"What's that?"*

"It's a… a…" Rose tried to pantomime a flying creature. "It's small and nocturnal and eats bugs."

"If it's small, why are you terrified of it?"

"Because it could have—" She lowered her voice. "Rabies."

“And that’s bad?”

“Very.”

Adam nodded. *“Okay, then I’ll go get rid of it.”*

Rose half-choked, half-laughed. “No, absolutely not. We have to call animal control or something. Besides, I’m not even sure where it is.”

“I am.” Adam’s stare shifted over her shoulder. *“It’s right there.”*

If she was living in a horror movie, this was the scene where the monster appeared at the end of a dark hallway.

Slowly turning around, Rose braced herself to see webby wings, spindly claws, a dark, furry body wriggling around on the wallpaper or dangling from the light…

There, sitting very still in the center of one of the tables, was not a bat at all.

But a tiny, dazed sparrow.

“Oh my God,” she blurted out.

Stepping to her right side, Adam signed, *“I thought those were called birds.”*

“They are. Lex thought it was a bat.”

“Does Lex know what birds are?”

Rose snorted. “Of course they—You know what, never mind.”

Looking around for something to use, she started to grab a dustpan and a polishing rag, thinking she could gently wrap the bird in it and carry it outside in the pan.

But when she turned around, Adam was already inside the café, and Lex watched from the doorway as he cautiously approached the scared sparrow.

Rose froze in place, watching him extend his hand and whistle softly.

The bird stared up at Adam, cocking its head to examine his hand, then his face, and finally the center joint of his index finger as it decided to hop on.

Adam whistled again—a cheery tone that seemed to calm the bird as it settled.

Turning, he brought it out of the café and paused in front of Rose.

"How did you…"

Adam shrugged, and gently stroked the top of the sparrow's head.

The damn bird looked *pleased*.

"I think it likes you," Lex said with a chuckle.

Smiling, Adam continued to pet the sparrow, holding it up to look it over. It didn't have any injuries that Rose could see.

"What…" Derek halted, gaping at Adam and the bird. "Is happening?"

Rose didn't bother to look at her brother. "We thought we had a bat. Turns out it was a bird. Adam's apparently very good with animals. I'm still not getting you a muffin."

"Excellent recap," Derek said. "Adam, want me to get the door for you?"

Nodding, he smiled down at the bird who was soaking up all the affection with a delighted chirp.

As Derek brushed by her, he muttered, "I wonder if all mermaids are good with sparrows or just Adam."

* * * * * * *

With his small notepad balanced on his knee, Adam kept one eye on his drawing and one eye on the pathway outside his window.

Dawn had broken into a full bloom morning, with glowing yellows and peachy oranges, illuminating the courtyard behind the inn.

The sketched out sparrow stared up at him from the page.

He'd drawn it from several different angles, pleased with how he captured the feathers and the curve of its beak.

In the bottom right corner, Adam carefully wrote the letters B-I-R-D and smiled.

The swirling void in his mind concerned him less the more he drew. Every morning and every night he picked something—anything he'd seen or been told about—and transferred the image from his mind onto a fresh sheet of Whittaker Inn stationary.

The practice eased his now recurring headaches.

He didn't tell Rose about them. She worried about him too much as it was, he didn't want to add to her stress.

Besides, they always went away. So it couldn't be that bad.

Squeaky iron hinges and the clattering of the gate latch announced her return, and Adam perked up, watching Rose stride up the pathway.

Setting his paper and pen aside, he checked the time on his nightstand clock and rushed to put shoes on.

He had about twenty minutes.

Quickly and quietly, Adam slipped out into the hallway and walked through the lobby.

"Good morning, Lex," he signed.

"Morning, Adam," they said, smiling. "Oh, I have those pens and stacks of stationary you asked for."

Adam slowed his gait as Lex withdrew everything out of a drawer and set it on the desk.

Grinning, he picked up one of the boxes of pens and shook it. *"Thank you."*

“Can I ask…” Lex tilted their head curiously. “Are you using them to practice writing?”

It wasn’t a secret Adam struggled with letters. At least no one made him feel insecure about it.

“No, they’re for drawing,” he signed.

“Drawing?” Lex frowned slightly. “If that’s what you’re doing, we should get you better art supplies.”

Adam straightened. *“Art supplies?”*

“Yeah, you know, pencils, charcoal, sketchpads…” Lex smiled and held up a finger. Grabbing their phone, they typed something and then showed him the screen. “See? Stuff like this.”

Leaning down to examine the various images, his eyes widened.

Perfectly sharpened pencils of all shades, long sticks of dark material that apparently drew very rich pictures, grey blocks of gummy stuff he’d never seen, and paints of all colors imaginable.

“I could… use those?”

Lex nodded. “Sure. I have some of this stuff at home from when I was taking art lessons. I can bring it all in tonight.”

He desperately wanted to know more about these ‘art lessons’ but he was under a time constraint.

“Thank you,” he signed, smiling. *“That’s very generous of you.”*

“I’m just glad someone will get to use it instead of it just collecting dust in my closet.”

Because he didn’t know what else to do, Adam circled the desk and wrapped his arms around Lex, squeezing them in a tight hug.

Muffled laughter tickled his neck. “You’re welcome, Adam.”

Releasing them, he beamed and started for the kitchen.

Today was already a good day.

* * * * * * *

For the fourth day in a row, Rose left her cottage to find a steaming cup of the worst coffee imaginable left on her doorstep.

And for the fourth day in a row, she choked it down.

This time she waited until it had cooled a bit and then gulped half of it while pretending it was just strange, fancy cold brew left in the sun for too long.

It didn't really work but at least she had more room in the cup for cream and sugar.

A lot of cream and sugar.

Rummaging around in the fridge for the bottle of mint mocha Coffee Mate Everly had accidentally bought while shopping in a hurry, she paused, sensing someone behind her.

"Okay, that's it," Everly said, nudging the metal door wider. "What is going on here?"

"I'm looking for—"

"Creamer, I know," she interrupted. "But see, you don't like cream in your coffee. You've never liked cream in your coffee. And you certainly don't like flavored cream in your coffee—"

"Can we please stop saying the word 'cream'? It's making me uncomfortable," Rose said, stepping away from the fridge.

Planting a hand on her hip, Everly looked her up and down.

"Are you feeling okay?"

Rose blinked. "Yes."

"You're not sick?"

"No."

"And we're not having a weird fight again like we did our sophomore trip to Plymouth Rock?"

Pointing a finger, Rose said, “Okay, the only reason we had that fight in the first place is ‘cause you promised to sit with me on the bus so we could share headphones and listen to the new Killers album, and then you sat with Tony Violenti instead.”

“I told you, he sat down without asking and I wasn’t comfortable using my big girl voice yet,” Everly argued. Waving a hand out, she shook her head. “And that’s beside the point. Why are you sneaking in here every morning and making coffee you can’t even stomach and putting it into a to-go cup?”

When she hesitated, Everly’s expression turned fretful.

“Rose, are you… are you an alcoholic?”

“What?” She nearly yelled.

Throwing her hands up, Everly cried, “Well I don’t know, why else would you make such stupidly strong coffee and pour a bunch of shit into it?”

“I didn’t make the coffee,” Rose blurted out.

This was officially even more ridiculous than their Tony Violenti bus fight.

Everly stared at her in utter confusion, her honey brown curls framing her rosy face.

“If you didn’t make it, then who…”

Realization dawned at the same time Rose’s embarrassment reached its peak.

Confusion melted into all-consuming amusement.

“Ohhh, I see,” she said, mirth lighting up her eyes.

“It’s nothing,” Rose muttered, turning back to the fridge to grab whatever bottle of creamer she could find and run out.

Everly laughed. “Nothing, huh? This nothing wouldn’t happen to be six-three, gorgeous, and totally head over heels for you, would it?”

If there is a God, please let him kill me now and save me from this misery.

“It’s not… He’s just…” Rose shut the fridge door. “I don’t know, okay? I don’t know why he’s making nearly inedible coffee and leaving it on my doorstep every morning, but I…” She plucked at the flap on the plastic lid. “I don’t have the heart to throw it out. So…”

“Oh my God, you like a boy,” Everly nearly squealed.

“Shhhh,” she hissed. “Stop that right now or I’ll fire you.”

That only made her laugh harder. “No you won’t, you hate cooking. Besides, I’m part owner, so you can’t fire me.”

Well, she had her there.

Rose tipped her head back and sighed at the ceiling. “Fine.”

Smiling so wide, her face threatened to split, Everly bounced a little on the balls of her feet. “So?”

“So, what?”

“This means you and Adam are—”

Cutting her off with a panicked noise, Rose rushed to her friend. “Shh, don’t say it.”

“Why not?”

“Because we’re not anything,” she said, glancing over her shoulder towards the door in paranoia. “I mean, we’re friends. But we’re not—”

“Rose McCleary, I’ll pummel you myself if you even try to deny that that meringue pie of a man out there doesn’t like you.”

“I know he likes me,” she said. “Adam is not very good at hiding his feelings.”

“Trust me, I’m aware.”

Lifting her cup to her lips, she stopped just before taking a sip.

“I’m too under caffeinated for this conversation, and this just tastes like tepid mud.”

Everly smirked. “You could teach Adam how to make better coffee, you know.”

“Or I could continue pretending I don’t know what he’s doing and not have to face the mortifying ordeal of having a crush on an amnesiac who everyone thinks is a mermaid.”

“Not everyone,” Everly said, opening the fridge and pulling out a bottle of vanilla creamer. “Your dad doesn’t seem swayed one way or the other.”

Rose’s jaw fell open. “Have you been discussing this with my parents?”

“What?” She shrugged innocently. “Derek added me to the group chat.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake.”

Taking the bottle and her horrible cup of coffee, Rose spun and headed for the door.

“I think this is really great, you know,” Everly called after her. “You’re showing progress.”

“Rah, rah, rah,” she deadpanned, letting the door swing shut behind her.

* * * * * * *

Pinning her phone to her ear with her shoulder, Rose tore open yet another envelope.

“That’s really nice mom, but I don’t know if we can make it tonight,” she said, scanning the linen invoice and placing it in the stack she’d mentally labeled as ‘bills’.

Her mother's voice was tinny through the speaker. "Well if you're busy, maybe Adam could come without you."

Looking to the stuffed swordfish above the fireplace as if it would come to life and join in on her disbelief, she asked, "You want Adam to come to *family* dinner?"

"He's great company," her mom argued. "And he's always so complimentary of my food."

"Adam's complimentary of everyone," she muttered, picking up another piece of mail.

As her mother continued making her case about Adam coming to dinner and the new recipe she wanted to try, Rose read over the bills that were adding up right in front of her.

It would be a little tight, but they'd manage. The inn was doing well for it being the beginning of the season, and as long as they didn't have any huge catastrophes, they'd do alright.

Knocking on wood just to be safe, she quickly tallied up the numbers and decided she could take a bit of a pay cut this month if needed.

Better for it to be her than Everly, or any of their other employees.

"Rose?"

Blinking, she tuned back into the conversation. "Huh?"

"Oh for goodness sake…"

"Sorry, mom, I'm a bit busy right now, so can we—"

"Just text your father if you're coming to dinner, okay?"

Bristling under the weight of her mother's frustration, she grit her teeth.

"Okay. Bye, mom."

Letting her phone hit the desk a little too hard, she opened that month's expense spreadsheet and started typing.

Halfway through, the hair on the back of her neck stood up and her gaze lifted from the computer screen.

But Adam wasn't there.

No one was.

Turning, she double checked he wasn't standing behind her.

A few patrons chatted over their late breakfast but otherwise, the inn was quiet.

Still, the sensation lingered.

Facing her computer once more, Rose jumped at the sight of grey flannel on the other side of the desk.

"Jesus," she gasped, hand flying to her throat. "Adam."

He winced. *"Sorry. I thought you heard me come up."*

"Nope, you're still eerily silent when you walk," she said, trying to force her heartrate to lower.

"Maybe I should stomp," he joked.

"That's not a bad idea."

When he looked like he was about to agree to do it, she shook her head.

"I was kidding," she said.

A warm smile curved across his face, accentuating the dimple in his left cheek. Strands of jet black escaped from the loose bun he'd wrapped his hair into, framing his sharp features better than if he'd purposefully styled it that way.

Heat flooded Rose's cheeks.

She had to stop *staring* at him.

The glint in his violet eyes told her he knew how affected she was and her embarrassment doubled.

Great, she thought. *Just great.*

Leaning his forearms on the desk, Adam craned his neck to look at the computer screen.

“What are you doing?”

“Praying we’ll make it to April without being in the red.”

He furrowed his brow. *“I don’t think I know what that means.”*

“I’m paying our bills,” she said with a weak chuckle.

His forehead smoothed out as he nodded. *“Need help?”*

“With our cash flow or adding the numbers together?”

“Unless I’m secretly rich, I think I can only assist with one of those.”

Caught off guard by his joke, Rose laughed. “Sounds like more motivation to find out who you were before.”

Gaze tracing her features, his smile lingered as he signed, *“Whatever I have, I’ll give it to you happily.”*

“Oh, Adam, no, that wasn’t…” She shook her head. “I didn’t mean that you had to pay me anything or—”

“I know,” he cut her off gently. *“But I would. I will. It’s the least I can do.”*

Pinned under Adam’s sincere stare, Rose fought with every ounce of willpower she had not to squirm.

Even with the desk between them, they felt so unbearably close.

And yet not close enough, if she were completely honest.

Swallowing, she croaked out, “Adam, I—”

Her phone pinged, derailing whatever confession was about to fly out of her mouth.

Zoey: Can I come by? I’m bored.

“Sorry, let me just…” She muttered, fumbling with her phone.

Rose: Sure, that’s fine.

Zoey: Great, cuz I’m already walking up the lane.

Rolling her eyes, Rose didn’t bother writing back.

“Zoey’s here,” she said. “Feel like entertaining my sister for a bit?”

Nodding, Adam grinned. *“Of course.”*

Before he could stride away, she caught his hand in a flash of bravery.

“Why have you been leaving coffee on my doorstep every morning?”

Adam’s ears turned a delicate shade of pink.

“I know it’s you because no one else here would make coffee so strong it could simultaneously fuel and strip a jet engine,” she added before reluctantly letting his hand go.

Scratching the back of his neck, he signed, *“I thought it was supposed to taste like that.”*

Rose chuckled. “Not quite.”

Slowly, he circled the corner of the desk but didn’t close the distance.

Much to her disappointment.

“It was the only thing I knew made you happy,” Adam signed, holding her stare.

Her confusion must’ve been evident because he hurried to explain.

“When you come back from your runs, you always look… sad. Like…” He tilted his head in thought. *“Like your thoughts are hurting you.”*

The simplicity of his words knocked the air out of her.

“But I know coffee makes you smile, so…” He shrugged. *“I just wanted to help you feel better.”*

Tears stung the corners of her eyes, but Rose refused to let them well over.

Adam frowned slightly. *"I can stop if—"*

"No," she said, lifting her hand to reach for him but pulling up short. "No, I… I like…" She cleared her throat. "I like it. Thank you, Adam."

His smile could have lit up the whole lobby.

"But we should probably teach you how to make proper coffee before my teeth turn black," she added over the sound of the employee entrance door swinging open.

Grinning, he nodded. *"You'll show me how?"*

"Sure," she said, ducking to hide her now fully flushed face.

"Hey, who's that lady outside?" Zoey called in lieu of a greeting.

Rose frowned. "What lady?"

Unzipping her blue fleece jacket, Zoey shrugged. "Some woman just standing in front of the inn."

"She's probably a guest waiting for a friend or something," she said, squinting out the windows but not seeing anyone of note. Turning back to her sister, she added, "You and Adam can help Everly finish the desserts for the Rotary Club luncheon tomorrow."

Cocking her head, Zoey asked Adam, "Does she always boss you around like that?"

Before she could defend herself, Adam smirked and signed, *"Yeah, but I kind of like it."*

Zoey's laugh covered the sound of Rose choking on her tongue.

As the pair of them wandered towards the kitchen, she definitely, most certainly did not stare at him.

Or his ridiculously broad shoulders.

Forcing her attention back to the spreadsheet on her screen, Rose got through typing half a line before her phone rang.

Groaning, she picked up without looking at the caller ID.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Rose,” Jimmy said, the din from the station filling the background. “I hope I’m not catching you at a bad time.”

“Not at all,” she said, ignoring the twisting in her gut. “What’s up?”

“Well you know how we took John Doe—I mean, Adam’s prints when he was discharged?”

“Yeah…” She tightened her grip on her cellphone. “Did you find a match?”

Jimmy huffed. “Not exactly. The techs were wondering if you could bring Adam back in to redo them.”

Once again, the hair on the back of Rose’s neck went up and a cold chill danced down her spine.

“Uh, sure,” she said, glancing around the room. “That’s not a problem. Um, can I ask why though?”

Out the front window, near the dormant lavender hedge, a figure caught her eye.

Dark hair and a teal shawl fluttering in the breeze…

“It’s the strangest thing,” Jimmy said over the line. “Our lab guy did everything right, but he kept getting the same result.”

Rose stopped breathing as she locked eyes with the woman staring at her through the glass.

The same woman who left that cryptic note for Adam.

Jimmy continued talking in her ear.

“He said Adam’s prints came back as ‘inhuman.’”

Chapter Eleven

Rose's head snapped back like an invisible hand slapped her. "What?"

"I know," Jimmy said. "It's bizarre. I don't think we've ever had something like that happen before."

Screwing her eyes shut, she forced her tone to stay even as she said, "Jimmy, it's not April Fool's for another few weeks, so this joke isn't very funny."

"What joke?" She could hear his chair squeaking as he leaned back. "I swear, Rose, the lab techs said the prints came back as 'undetermined.'"

Blinking, she sought out the woman on the other side of the window, but she'd disappeared from view.

"'Undetermined' isn't the same thing as 'inhuman', Jimmy," she sighed. "He's not three raccoons stacked up under a trench coat."

"Huh?"

"Never mind."

"Listen, they said it's most likely from prolonged exposure to saltwater," he told her. "If we can retake his prints then we can rescan them, and that'll help our search."

Taking a breath, she nodded to herself. "Okay, yeah. I can bring him to the station tomorrow."

"Great," he said, chair squeaking again like he was rocking back and forth. "Thanks, Rose."

"No problem, Jimmy. Have a good one."

Hanging up, she slid her phone onto the desk and immediately looked out the window again.

Nothing.

She could almost convince herself she'd hallucinated the woman if Zoey hadn't seen her too.

The oddities were beginning to tip the scale on the side of high strangeness, but that didn't change much for how Rose felt.

Adam was Adam.

Even if he… wasn't.

* * * * * * *

The trip to the police station the next day was as run of the mill as it could be while accompanied by the main character of East Cove's gossip for the last three and a half weeks.

Lots of people wanted to ask how he was faring, even more people wanted to make idle chitchat, and every single person stared openly.

It took everything in Rose not to glare back at them.

They were cops, for God's sake, weren't they used to seeing people who went through something stressful and came out alright on the other side?

Adam, however, beamed the entire time, completely unflummoxed by all the attention.

Thankfully, the station had an ASL translator who could help when Rose was caught in yet another repetitive conversation with a patrol officer or the desk sergeant.

Taking Adam back to a separate room to redo his fingerprints, they had Rose wait in an uncomfortable plastic chair.

She lasted two minutes before standing up and pacing the short tiled lobby area.

And because her thoughts had been running a mile a minute since waking up that morning, she went back to the desk sergeant.

“Um, I was wondering,” she started, tugging at the sleeves of her oversized chunky knit sweater. “What exactly is the protocol if someone comes to… well, claim Adam?”

Staring at her over his wire rimmed glasses, the older gentleman tilted his head in thought.

“I guess it depends,” he said, his Massachusetts accent ballooning his vowels. “If he doesn’t have a record, and he’s not in any other system to confirm his identity, they’ll have to provide proof. Birth certificate, state ID, social security card, that sorta thing. Photos too. If they can’t do that, we could run a DNA test on a family member, but those results could take a while.”

Rose nodded, trying not to look as worried as she felt.

“If he’s married, they can take over as his guardian,” the desk sergeant continued. “Or a parent, if he’s not.”

She vehemently ignored the mental image of Adam with another partner.

“Would he… have to go with them?” She asked, hooking her thumb behind the crossbody strap of her purse. “If he didn’t want to, I mean.”

The man shrugged, stiff uniform shirt barely wrinkling with the movement. “That’s for a judge to decide. They could hold a competency hearing.”

Before the spark of hope could alight in her chest, the desk sergeant looked over the edge of his glasses at her again.

“He still doesn’t have his memories, right?” When Rose nodded, he said, “Then the judge would probably rule in favor of his family or spouse. Diminished capacity, and all that.”

“He’s not diminished,” she snapped before she could stop herself.

Thankfully, the man didn’t take offense.

“Not to you, not to us, but in a court of law…” He arched an unruly greying eyebrow. “That’s where things get dicey.”

Tugging on her purse strap again, Rose nodded. “Right. Okay. Thank you.”

She started to turn away but glanced back.

“But he won’t get handed over to the first person who calls and says they’re his wife or whatever, right?”

“We’re not really in the business of handing amnesiacs over to complete strangers,” he said, and she appreciated his dry tone.

Nothing felt more like home than a New Englander who didn’t suffer fools.

Flashing a tight smile, she thanked him right as Adam and Jimmy appeared around the corner.

“Thanks again for doing this,” Jimmy said, clapping Adam on the shoulder. “Hopefully these will scan okay for our tech guy.”

“And if they don’t?” Rose asked, folding her arms.

Jimmy glanced at Adam again. “Then half our precinct wins the betting pool.”

“What’s a betting pool?” Adam arched an eyebrow.

Pegging Jimmy with a hard stare, Rose said, “Something very unprofessional for cops to be doing.”

“Ah…” Clearing his throat, he backed up half a step. “Anyway, hope the rest of your day goes well.”

Gesturing for Adam to follow her, she tossed a “you too” over her shoulder.

“Good luck,” the desk sergeant called.

Striding across the parking lot at her side, Adam signed, *“You don’t like him, do you?”*

“I don’t like that he thinks all of this is a joke,” she said.

He scratched under his jaw and signed, *“Some of it is kind of funny.”*

“Your future and wellbeing isn’t a Netflix comedy special.”

Pulling her gently to a stop by her elbow, Adam turned her until they were eye to eye.

“It’s okay, Rose,” he signed, gazing down at her with breath-stealing gentleness. *“We can laugh at the absurdity of it all.”*

Closing her eyes for a beat, she let the sensation of his fingers rubbing circles over her sweater along her joint to soothe her temper.

Blinking, she said, “It doesn’t feel absurd to me, it feels…”

“Like you need to look out for me.”

“Well, yeah.”

“Because you care about me.”

“Of course I do.”

Grinning, he reached for her arm again, dipping his thumb into the bend and urging her close enough to inhale his clean, sea salt scent.

“What?” She asked, furrowing her brow.

Adam released her to sign, *“You’re falling for me.”*

The sound of her mouth popping open was almost as undignified as the act itself.

“I knew it,” he added before winking at her—actually winking, damn him—and sauntering to the car.

Shock glued her feet to the asphalt.

Her Golden Retriever sweetheart creampuff of an amnesiac was getting some swagger.

Rose was so totally screwed.

Regaining her faculties, she rushed after him.

Climbing into the car, she started the engine and said, “Alright, big guy. We’re getting coffee. And while we’re there, maybe you should pay attention to how it’s *supposed* to be done.”

A deep rumbling noise escaped him, and she smirked.

I guess he does like it when I’m bossy.

* * * * * * *

Grabbing to-go coffees from the Scuttlebutt café was supposed to be a quick errand, but Adam refused to let Rose waste the beautiful day stuck inside behind the inn desk and frowning at her computer screen.

As soon as their cups were in hand and they were out the door, he started in the opposite direction of the car.

“Adam?” She called after him. “What’s wrong?”

He shook his head. *“Nothing,”* he signed. *“I want to explore.”*

“Explore?” She jogged to catch up to him. “You realize if we take three left turns we’ve seen all of East Cove, right?”

Eyeing her with a smirk, he sipped his hot chocolate.

He wouldn’t yield. They were going to spend the morning out in the sunshine, away from her bills and her phone and the guests who ask her endless questions and make the frown line in her forehead linger too long.

They were going to enjoy themselves.

“I mean, I guess I get it,” she said, probably to fill the quiet. “The inn isn’t very interesting, and we don’t have a lot of stuff to keep you occupied—”

Adam turned, passing her his cup so he could sign, *“I’m never bored at the inn. I like it there, and I like doing odd jobs around the place. That’s not why we’re doing this.”*

Her bright blue eyes widened, and something thumped wildly in his chest.

His heart.

He loved looking into her eyes.

“Then… why are we?” Rose asked.

“Because as much as you complain about this town and the people in it, this place is a part of you,” he signed. *“And I want to learn more. About it and you.”*

She blushed and he was suddenly gripped with jealousy that the pink hue got to kiss her cheeks and he didn’t.

“So let’s go,” he added, smiling down at her.

Taking his hot chocolate back, he turned and headed down Main Street with Rose at his side.

He made sure not to walk too fast, so she didn’t have to struggle to keep up.

Looking into all the storefront windows, he attempted educated guesses as to what they offered. One was a fancy pet supplies, one was home décor and gifts, one was all pink things—he couldn’t tell what those pink things were for though.

And one… One he immediately needed to go into.

“Adam?” Rose asked as he pushed open the door. “What is it?”

All along the walls were works of art like the ones Lex had shown him when explaining the supplies they’d brought in.

He didn’t know much, but he knew most of these were paintings, while a few pieces were pen and ink drawings, and the oblong figures set upon pedestals in the center were sculptures.

The clean, white walls contrasted with the bright colors of the art, jarring him slightly.

Everything was so beautiful he started to tremble.

Where did he start? Where did he stand? Was he allowed to get closer?

Tapping his arm gently, Rose gestured for him to give her his cup and he handed it over.

“Hi there,” a soft voice called from the back office. “Feel free to look around. I’ll be back here doing inventory if you have any questions.”

“Thank you,” Rose said with a smile.

Adam tugged at the hem of his tee shirt. He had so many questions and didn’t know how to verbalize any of them.

Inhaling a shaky breath, he picked a direction and started towards the first painting he saw.

The image was of a field, illuminated by the golden light of dawn. Two horses stood beneath a flowering tree, one stooped to eat some of the tall grass.

Leaning in, he studied the soft brushstrokes that created such a realistic rendering of nature.

Adam lifted a hand on impulse, but Rose stopped him.

“We’re not supposed to touch,” she whispered.

His ears burned but he nodded.

“It’s like they’re real,” he signed, pointing to the horses.

“Yeah, whoever painted this is pretty talented.”

The next piece caught his eye, and he sidestepped over to look at it, accidentally bumping into Rose, but she didn’t seem to mind.

It was a painting of a city street crowded with people. There weren’t any trees or fields of grass—only buildings and brick and concrete and cars. People of all styles and shapes weaving through the scene as if they could march themselves right off the canvas.

“I know that area,” Rose murmured. “It’s State Street in Boston.”

Adam gaped at her. *“Is that close to here?”*

Sipping her coffee, she nodded. “About an hour if traffic isn’t too bad. Or an hour and a half by train.”

Looking back to the painting, he tried to memorize the curve of the street and the red hue of the brick building focal point.

“We could go if you’d like,” she offered. “I think you’d enjoy Boston.”

His head bobbed vigorously before she’d even finished her sentence.

He wanted to see everything.

They continued their messy loop around the gallery, with Adam setting the pace and Rose trailing behind.

Each painting was more stunning than the last. Some were vivid and exuberant, others muted and solemn. A few reminded him of mornings at the inn—peaceful and warm, with soft light and a sense of safety.

One extremely large piece on the opposite wall reminded him of the inky void of his mind. Deep indigo waves, shadows and odd angles and an urgency that made his throat tighten.

He felt uncomfortable staring at it, and yet he couldn’t look away for a long time.

Maybe… Maybe he could put his own mental void on paper like this artist had done for themselves.

Would that help heal him?

Rose’s footsteps behind him pulled him from his thoughts.

“Do you like this one?”

He tilted his head. *“I… I don’t know. It makes me feel something, but… I don’t know what.”*

Rose hummed under her breath. “I think art does that to a lot of people.”

Turning, Adam spotted a painting that depicted nothing from real life and yet his chest warmed as he studied it.

“This one,” he signed, gesturing for her to follow him. *“This one is you.”*

He stopped directly in front of the canvas covered in streaks and swirls of the richest, brightest hues of sunlight. One corner was like dawn—lavender and peach melting into gold. Another was as fierce as midday, sharp and blinding but welcome all the same.

Each edge blended towards each other, forming a cocoon of heat.

“It’s… me?” Rose asked, glancing up at him.

Adam nodded, a smile curving his lips. *“It makes me feel exactly how I do when I’m with you.”*

A few days ago he would have fretted over whether or not he’d said the wrong thing, or if Rose was uncomfortable with his word choices.

But now he knew she’d just needed time to process.

He didn’t fault her for that, he needed the same every time he learned a new task or turn of phrase.

He could wait for her.

Turning to look at her, he was rewarded with more of that delicate blush across her cheeks and a shimmer in her eyes that told him she was deeply affected and trying to hide it.

“How…” She cleared her throat gently. “How do you feel when you’re with me?”

Adam practically lunged for the door she’d just opened for him.

“Warm,” he signed. *“And safe. Excited because I never know what you’re going to do or say or where you’re going next. Alive and awake, like*

my skin is tingling."

Her gaze bounced between his face and his hands, and he knew he was signing just a bit too fast, so he forced his movements to slow.

"My chest burns but it doesn't hurt and I'm always happy when I see you," he continued. *"And when you smile, I forget anything that was troubling me."*

Rose exhaled shakily, her lashes fluttering against the pale curve of her cheeks.

"Oh shit," she whispered, but there was no frustration in her voice.

"What?"

That shimmer in her eyes doubled, highlighting her blue irises until they matched the noonday sky.

"I…" She swallowed and he tracked the movement of her throat with interest. "I just wasn't expecting all of that."

He grinned. *"Good. I'm glad I could surprise you."*

And because he couldn't help himself, Adam reached up, brushing a few strands of her scarlet red hair out of her face and tucking it behind her ear.

Perhaps it was a mistake because he instantly craved to touch her again.

His only consolation was seeing her stare drop to his lips and sensing she wanted to touch him too.

Adam didn't ask her how she felt when she was with him.

He knew she'd tell him eventually, in her own way.

"Come on," he signed, tugging her sleeve. *"You've indulged me enough. I want to see something you like now."*

Smirking, Rose lifted her coffee cup and pointed at it.

A rumbling noise escaped the back of his throat, and he shook his head.

“Something else,” he signed, taking his hot chocolate back and making his way towards the door.

Calling out a thank you to the woman running the gallery, Rose followed him onto the street.

Adam listened as she chatted idly about growing up in East Cove, grateful that she was comfortable enough to tell him more.

It may take her a little while to open up, but it was always worth it when she did.

Halfway up a side street Rose said her childhood piano teacher lived on, the back of Adam’s neck tightened and pricked with an odd sensation.

Sipping his drink, he glanced over his shoulder.

The strange woman with aquamarine eyes and stern countenance stood at the corner, glaring at him.

And with Rose distracted, she signed something to Adam he couldn’t decipher before turning and disappearing behind the edge of a building.

Chapter Twelve

“I’m sorry, could you repeat that?” Rose asked into the phone over the lilting trad music filling the inn. “Oh, yes, we have availability at nine. Okay great, see you then.”

She was halfway through Saint Patrick’s Day dinner. She could make it.

And when the last guest was out the door, she was pouring herself two fingers of whiskey and running a bath.

The front door swung open and five familiar faces strolled in, already pulling off their jackets.

“Hey there, Rosie,” Grampy shouted across the small space.

Her smile felt like a wince as she waved to them.

“You’re just in time, your table is all set,” she told them, leading the way.

“Is Adam here?” Zoey asked, tugging off her pastel knit hat. “I have something to show him.”

“He’s working, Zo. Maybe later.”

Weaving through the crowded dining room, she gestured towards the large round table near the back.

Her dad beamed at her as he draped his coat on the back of his chair. “Everything looks incredible, Rose. You’ve outdone yourself.”

“Thanks, dad.” She smiled up at him.

A tug on her sleeve brought her head around and her mother was leaning in.

“The decorations you picked look a bit… tacky, don’t you think?”

For the sake of everyone, Rose simply shrugged.

“I’ll be right back with some waters for you.”

“Screw that, bring us some beer,” Grampy called as she walked away. “And Jameson, too.”

Happy Saint Patrick’s Day, indeed.

Shoving open the kitchen door, she wove between two other servers and the line cook they’d hired for the season as they moved through the room.

“My family is here,” she announced, knowing only Everly would be listening. “My mother’s already insulted the decorations she forced on us and Grampy is demanding booze.”

“So just like any other night then, huh?”

“Very funny.” Rose glanced around. “Where’s Adam?”

“He took out the trash a few minutes ago,” Everly said. “I hope he’s not having to shoo away that raccoon again.”

Grabbing a water pitcher and a basket of fresh bread, she said, “I’ll go check on him if he’s not back by the time I take my family’s order.”

“Is, uh…” Everly faltered, plating a hefty portion of Shepard’s Pie. “Is Derek out there too?”

“Yeah, he’s the one who wanted everyone to show up tonight in the first place,” she said, striding back across the kitchen.

Her toe was just over the threshold when curiosity reeled her in.

Reversing her steps, Rose stopped at her best friend’s side.

“Why?”

“Hm?”

“Why do you care if Derek is with them?”

Everly scratched at her wide cloth headband with the back of her wrist. “Oh, he just… owes me twenty bucks, that’s all.”

“Derek owes you money?” Rose rolled her eyes. “That jerk. I’ll harass him for you.”

Heading out for the second time, she thanked their bus boy as he cleaned off a table and made her way back to her family.

“This band is great,” her dad said as she filled his water glass. “Where’d you find them?”

“Poached them from that terrible event space in Newburyport.”

Her mother tsked loudly. “Rose, that’s awful.”

Smirking, she said, “Not for the band it’s not. At least I pay them their rate plus a tip *and* let them set out a tip jar on top of that.”

“Atta girl,” Grampy chuckled. “That’s how you keep ‘em coming back.”

She winked and filled his glass.

Rolling his green and black checked shirt sleeves up, Derek scanned the dining room. “The food looks good.”

“Everly’s really pulling out all the stops,” she said. Scowling at her brother, she added, “Hey, next time you need cash, don’t hit up my friend.”

Confusion wrinkled his forehead. “What?”

“That twenty bucks you owe Everly better be back in her pocket by the end of the night or I’m stealing your favorite wrench set.”

“I have no i—”

“Derek, why are you borrowing money from people?” Their mother asked, giving him a patented disappointed glare over the edge of her menu. “Isn’t that why you have petty cash?”

“Mom, I’m not—”

Zoey tugged on Rose’s sleeve, gesturing for her to lean closer.

“Can I show you something?”

Ignoring the rest of her family as they bickered, she bent down so she could see her sister’s phone screen.

Rose expected it to be another mermaid joke, but instead a beautifully shot photo of her and Adam filled the screen.

Her breath caught in her throat.

It was from their walk along the beach. They were laughing, angled towards each other with a familiarity that was usually reserved for close friends or…

Partners.

“I’m going to submit it for my school’s art showcase,” Zoey said. “If that’s okay…”

Even if the idea of having her face up on a high school art room wall made her itch, Rose couldn’t say no.

“It’s fine with me,” she said. “Just be sure to clear it with Adam too.”

“I will,” Zoey said, putting her phone back in her pocket. “That’s why I wanted to talk to him.”

Smoothing her hand over her kid sister’s hair, she laughed a little as Zoey swatted her away.

Taking her family’s food order, and making sure they didn’t want for beer, Rose scanned the room for Adam.

He hadn’t come back inside yet.

Ignoring the worry burning in her stomach, she made her way towards the employee exit.

In the cool, dark night, everything was in stark relief to the heat and noise of the dining room. The shadows deeper, the wind gentler, voices…

One voice. A woman’s.

Following it, Rose kept her footfalls light as she approached.

“…You have to understand, I can’t explain everything without taking you to a healer,” the woman said from around the corner of the inn.

“It won’t make sense. You’re already not who you were, I can’t—”

She paused, and Rose guessed it was because Adam was signing.

“I don’t understand this new language, Dex,” the woman groaned. “It’s not what we use.”

Ice water flooded Rose’s system.

She called him ‘Dex’. Not Adam.

This woman believed she knew him.

“Please, mother is looking for you and she’s equally worried and furious,” the woman continued. “You need to come home—”

Quickening her pace, Rose rounded the corner.

That same woman from before—the one who’d left that cryptic note and lingered outside the Whittaker—was now holding onto Adam’s forearm, begging him to come with her.

He saw her milliseconds before the woman did and even in the dark, the concern and relief in his eyes was evident.

“Can I help you?” Rose snapped, rushing to his side.

Dropping her hand, the woman backed up half a step. “I… I was just asking for directions.”

“You know, my night vision might not be so great, but my hearing is fine,” Rose retorted, curling her lip. “And I didn’t hear a single thing about asking which road to take.”

On instinct, she took another two steps forward, putting herself between this interloper and Adam.

“Who are you?”

The woman floundered, wide, bright eyes dancing between Rose and Adam.

“I’m…” She glanced over Rose’s shoulder. “My name is Odette.”

She stared at Adam as if waiting for a reaction.

Rose crossed her arms. “Alright, Odette. Want to tell me why you’re trying to kidnap my friend?”

Odette balked. “Kidnap? I’m doing no such thing.”

“You were trying to convince him to leave with you—a complete stranger,” she said. “Most people try that gag with a panel van and the promise of candy, but hey, points for boldness I guess.”

Glaring at her, Odette visibly struggled to steady herself. “Your companion is very rude, Dexhart.”

The name clanged in Rose’s ears.

“And that brings me to my next point,” she said, pointing at her. “If you know him, why didn’t you say anything that first night you showed up?”

Odette’s mouth opened and closed several times before she spoke.

“I thought… I had anticipated that he would recognize me,” she said. “I hadn’t realized his memories were gone.”

Anger simmered in Rose’s veins. Had this woman turned her back on him that first night because she thought he was too damaged?

Movement from the corner of her eye alerted her to Adam signing a response but she missed most of it.

“…Are you?”

Odette frowned. “I don’t understand.”

Turning, Rose asked him to repeat himself so she could translate.

“If you thought I’d recognize you, then who are you?”

The silence was heavy as Odette considered her reply.

“I’m your sister,” she said to Adam.

Rose’s throat went dry.

“I know my actions are confusing,” Odette continued. “And you have no reason to trust me, but I’m begging you to. I mean you no harm.”

Beneath the thundering of her pulse, a tiny bell rang in Rose's head.

They looked alike.

Similar bone structure and complexion. Her hair was a shade lighter than Adam's and their eyes didn't match, but they both held themselves the same way.

With strength and confidence, and an edge of unyielding that hinted at a familial stubborn streak.

"Your safety is my only concern," Odette said, pegging Adam with a pleading stare. "Please, Dexhart—"

Adam slashed his hand through the air before signing, *"Stop calling me that. My name is Adam."*

Translating for him, Rose looked to Odette.

Heartbreak was etched into her eerily beautiful face.

"No, it's not," she whispered.

Reaching into the deep pocket of her flowing skirts, she withdrew a small object.

"Mother will come looking for you soon," she said. "There's hope she'll be able to rectify whatever was done to you, but…" She shook her head. "I worry what will happen if she can't."

Even if her words were confusing, the dread in her voice couldn't be denied.

Holding out her hand, she said, "Take this. I pray you'll remember how to use it."

After a beat of hesitation, Adam took the tiny thing from her – A bright white and orange striped nautilus shell.

"Remember, Dex," Odette murmured to him. "I'm not your enemy."

Facing her again, Rose stared her down until she finally turned and disappeared down the lane.

Exhaling, she reached for Adam. “Are you okay?”

Nodding, he examined the shell, flipping it over in his palm.

“Do you need a minute?”

He didn’t move to sign anything, and Rose thought for a moment the shock was getting to him.

Taking a breath to speak again, she was cut off by his strong arms banding around her, hauling her into his chest in a fierce hug.

That time she was able to angle her face away from the center of his chest, saving his shirt and her lipstick.

“Hey, it’s okay,” she said softly, rubbing his muscled back. “I’ve got you.”

He pressed a quick kiss to the top of her head—something she wasn’t even sure he meant to do—and released her.

“Thank you,” he signed. *“That was… I don’t know if I felt scared or angry or confused or…”* He shook his head. *“Maybe all of it.”*

Keeping her hand on his shoulder, Rose nodded. “That’s understandable.”

“What… do I do?”

Staring into his eyes, her chest tightened.

She hadn’t seen him this lost since his first days at the inn. Since he was in the hospital.

“Right now,” she started, offering a gentle smile. “You’re going to go back inside and join my family for dinner.”

When he started to argue, she stilled his hands with hers.

“We’ll be fine,” she said. “You’re officially off the clock. Boss’ orders.”

A weak grin curved the side of his mouth.

“You’ll eat, and listen to my Grampy tell one of his stories, and hang out with Zoey and Derek, and we can talk about all of this—” She gestured around them. “—Tomorrow.”

After considering it a moment, Adam nodded. *“I am pretty hungry.”*

“Of course you are, being accosted in the dark by your maybe-sister works up an appetite.”

Some of the tension bled out of his shoulders and Rose smiled.

“You know, you’re kind of scary when you want to be,” he signed with a heated glint in his eyes.

“I’m a pit bull in business casual,” she said.

“I don’t know what that is, but I’m glad you came looking for me.”

He had no idea how much she returned that sentiment.

Taking his hand, she led them both back inside the Whittaker, where the dark and unknown couldn’t reach them.

* * * * * * *

Adam awoke even earlier the next morning with two goals in mind.

The first was to make Rose’s coffee the correct way he’d learned. Lex had even offered to assist him if he needed it, which he appreciated greatly.

The second was to pour his personal void onto paper, much like the art he’d seen days prior.

Moments after joining Rose’s family for dinner, his head felt like it was being split in two.

He hadn’t told anyone—he didn’t want to be a distraction or have anyone fret over him. And the company was something he desperately needed to feel centered again.

That woman… Odette has shaken him to his core.

Sister. He had a sister.

Might have a sister, he could hear Rose saying in his mind. *We don't know anything for sure.*

It was true. They didn't have proof.

But that didn't ease the churning dread in Adam's gut.

If he had a sister, and a mother, then who else did he have? Who else was out there waiting for him to remember who they were?

And why didn't they come to him? Why didn't they reintroduce themselves or try to help him regain the memories he lost?

Anger flared in his chest as he combed his hair and twisted it into a knot at the back of his head.

If that was how his family treated him, why would he ever want to return?

Rose would say he deserved better, and this time, Adam agreed.

Dressing in his most comfortable jeans, white tank top, and blue denim overshirt, he rolled the sleeves to his elbows while staring at the shell he'd placed on his desk.

I pray you'll remember how to use it, Odette's words echoed in his head.

Scowling, Adam strode closer.

Pushing it to the side, he grabbed a slip of paper and a pen before leaving his room and heading for the kitchen.

It took him two tries to measure the grounds, but eventually he made what he could only hope was correctly bitter coffee and not overly bitter coffee.

In the harsh kitchen lighting, he bent over the stainless steel countertop and carefully wrote, "GOOD MORNING! I TRIED TO MAKE IT RIGHT THIS TIME! YOU CAN TELL ME IF IT IS BAD!"

He frowned at his shaky handwriting but at least all the letters were in the correct order.

Beneath his message, he sketched a scene from the night before—the trio of musicians playing in the dining room, their instruments held with ease and joy as they played for the guests.

It was something he didn't think Rose got to enjoy, as she'd been busy all the way until the end of the night.

With a piece of masking tape from Everly's station, he secured the paper to the side of Rose's cup and smiled.

Things were so confusing now, but at least he had this.

At least he had Rose.

Chapter Thirteen

After giving directions to several good hiking trails to guests from Ohio, delivering extra pillows and a quilt to Room Seven, and calling Derek to come fix the water pressure in Room Three, Rose returned to the front desk for the master keys to begin cleaning duties.

Once the full swing of summer hit, she'd have the revenue for a housekeeping staff for the entire week instead of just on the weekends, but until then—and until she'd paid down a few of her bills—she had no qualms about donning the rubber gloves herself.

And since not a lot of guests treated the quaint rooms of the Whittaker Inn like a rockstar suite at the Bellagio, clean up usually didn't take too long.

A light knock on the desk brought her head up but she wasn't startled.

"Housekeeping stuff?" Adam asked, nodding to the jangly set of keys in her hand.

"Yep," she said, spinning them on her finger. "Time to go polish some porcelain and ignore whatever I see on the sheets when I change them."

Confusion tugged at his features, and she chuckled.

"Never mind," she said with a wave of the hand.

Tracking her as she circled the desk, Adam signed, *"Can I help?"*

"You want to wipe down sinks and replace toilet paper rolls?"

"If it means I get to use the blue stuff, sure," he signed, smiling.

Rose laughed. "It's called Windex. And sure, knock yourself out."

As they moved upstairs, Adam grabbed the housekeeping cart from the hall closet and followed her.

Doing the quick knock-and-announce-themselves routine, she entered the first room that didn't have a 'do not disturb' placard hanging from the knob and assessed the damage.

This guests staying in this room were a retired couple visiting friends from their boating days, so Rose wasn't terribly concerned about the place being trashed.

And she was right.

Explaining the tasks they needed to complete, she double checked that Adam felt comfortable doing his portion before getting to work on hers.

Changing over the linens, fluffing the pillows, and vacuuming the rug were things she could do in her sleep.

When she got to the towels, she smiled a little as a memory flashed in her mind.

Looking to Adam as he cleaned the mirror, she asked, "Hey, want to see a trick?"

Pausing his wipe down, he nodded.

Grabbing two hand towels from the cart, Rose held them up in front of her like she was at a middle school talent show. Turning her back to him, she quickly twisted and wrapped the fabric until it was in the exact shape she wanted.

Facing him once more, Rose held up her creation, beaming from ear to ear.

"Ta da," she exclaimed. "Those simple pieces of cloth are now vaguely swan like."

"How did you do that?" He asked, delight spreading across his features.

Rose shrugged. "It's pretty easy once you learn. You just fold them together and kind of tug until it looks… well, like that."

Petting the swan's flimsy head, Adam looked up at her. *"You're magic."*

"No, not at all," she said with a laugh. "I just spent a summer working at a fancy resort in Vermont and we had to do them for every room. I can also make a bear, a dog, and an elephant. Never quite got the hang of the monkey though."

His eyes searched hers for something she couldn't place.

"Do… do you want to keep it?" She murmured.

Adam bobbed his head with joy, strands of black falling loose from his hair tie.

"I'll put it on the cart to keep it safe for you," she said, ducking out into the main bedroom.

When she returned, he moved into her path.

"I like how much I don't know about you yet," he signed.

Rose frowned slightly. "What?"

"Did I not say that correctly?" Adam tilted his head. *"I meant, I like how much there is to still learn about you."* He smiled, wide and bright. *"You're fascinating to me."*

In her thirty years, Rose had been called many things.

Difficult, ambitious, stubborn, detached…

Never in her life had anyone called her fascinating. And *never* with such love in their eyes when they said it.

Rose's lips parted silently. She could barely pull in enough air to speak, let alone think of what to say.

Adam furrowed his brow. *"I'm sorry, was that the wrong thing to say? I didn't mean it as an insult—"*

Her hands fell on top of his, stilling them.

“Thank you,” she murmured. “I… I don’t feel like I’m all that interesting.”

Squeezing her fingertips, Adam slipped out from her hold only to sign, *“That’s just because you don’t see yourself like I do.”*

Rose dropped her gaze to his lips, barely able to look back up into his eyes.

It didn’t matter. Adam knew.

And by raw longing in his face, he was right there with her.

Swaying into his space, Rose became a moon in slow orbit, peacefully trapped by his gravitational pull.

Ducking his head, violet eyes turned midnight sky black as he silently begged her to move closer.

With shaking hands, Rose reached for any part of him she could grasp and landed on his toned forearm and the rolled edge of his denim shirt sleeve.

Her pulse skyrocketed.

Inhaling his clean, ocean air scent, she couldn’t imagine wanting to smell anything else but him for the rest of her life.

“Adam…” She breathed.

He nodded, leaning even further into her.

“Please,” he mouthed, and her fraying thread of restraint snapped.

Cursing under her breath, Rose surged forward, clutching his face with both hands before crushing her lips to his.

Every nerve ending in her body flared to life like a billion little flashbulbs.

Stunned, Adam didn’t move for two full beats. But before she could pull back, he wrapped his arms around her tightly, hauling her almost off her feet.

Blind and elated, they stumbled into the bathroom wall, and Rose giggled against his mouth.

Adam's broad hands found their way into her hair, yanking a few bobby pins free as he held her close.

Slanting her mouth over his, she deepened the kiss until they were both shivering and panting.

Pushing her back flush against the wall, Adam followed her cues as if he could read her mind. When she pressed, he opened. When she teased, he chased. When she dipped, he caught her.

Trailing his right hand down the column of her throat, he held her gently, thumb swiping over the hinge of her jaw. His left had dropped to her hip, kneading the curve of her body and holding her to him.

Rose didn't remember wrapping her arms around his neck, or yanking his hair tie out, but she'd never forget the feel of his silken hair between her fingers.

A deep, barely audible groan escaped Adam as she pulled at the strands, and Rose stalled.

"Sorry," she mumbled.

But he shook his head and replaced her hands in his hair when she tried to release him.

Oh. He likes it.

A thrill ran through her, and she smiled, nipping his bottom lip with just enough force to elicit that same sound from him again.

Grinning, Adam retaliated by slipping his hand under the hem of her blouse, running his nails lightly over the soft skin of her low back until she arched into him.

Rose sucked in a sharp breath. It may have been a while since her last hook up, but she was familiar with *that* particular sensation.

She burned with need—was dizzy and breathless and barely aware of anything except all the points where her and Adam connected.

More. She wanted more.

And once again, he felt the shift of her subconscious wave, and happily obliged.

Breaking their kiss, Adam smiled down at her before dipping his head and trailing scorching lips along the sensitive skin of her neck.

Gasping, she clutched the back of his head, holding him to her.

Not that he seemed interested in going elsewhere.

As he tested her response with just the faintest hint of teeth, she wrenched his shirt in her fist and fumbled to touch his bare abdomen.

The more he kissed her, the more she wanted. And the more she wanted, the less she cared about anything else.

The whole building could have crumbled down around them, and Rose wouldn't have even blinked.

"Adam," she managed, voice hoarse. "Adam, please…"

Dragging his lips over the valley of her breasts just barely visible above the neckline of her blouse, he nodded to tell her he was listening.

She swallowed. "I want to touch you."

Looking up at her through his lashes, Adam arched an eyebrow and smirked.

Her Golden Retriever was turning into a wolf.

Dark eyes flicked to where her hand twisted in his shirt and then back up, wordlessly saying, *'You are touching me.'*

Laughing breathlessly, she blushed. "I meant that… I want to…"

A distant chime struck the warm bubble around them, cracking it.

They both froze.

Ding.

Adam straightened, glancing in the direction of the hallway.

Ding. Ding.

It was the bell for the front desk.

“Shit,” Rose hissed, gathering herself. “Everly must not hear it. I have to—”

He nodded in understanding, but the set of his jaw told her he was anything but pleased.

She knew how he felt.

Adjusting her shirt and the waistband of her pants, she caught a glimpse of herself in the bathroom mirror and flushed.

She looked as debauched as she felt.

Plucking out the few bobby pins hanging from her waves, she finger combed her hair as she hurried out of the suite.

On a dime, she turned around. “Adam, I’ll be right back, okay?”

He appeared in the doorway, raking a hand through the tangles she’d left him with.

“It’s alright. I’ll finish up in here,” he signed, flashing her a small smile.

Thanking him, Rose practically bolted for the stairs.

He was too good for her. That moment proved it.

Steadying herself, Rose descended to the lobby, already geared up to use her most apologetic hospitality voice.

“Hi there,” she said to the back of the man standing at the front desk. “I am so sorry about that delay. I’ve taken up housekeeping duties today and—”

The man turned, and Rose skidded to a halt on the hardwood.

His beard was new. And his hair was a bit longer.

But she’d recognize him anywhere.

Air left her like she’d been punched in the gut.

He flashed a wary smile, the corners of his eyes wrinkling a little.

“Hey there, Rose.”

She blinked.

And blinked again.

“Pete.”

Chapter Fourteen

Rose didn’t move.

She wasn’t sure she could if she wanted.

“The place looks great,” Pete said, glancing around the lobby. “Is that the swordfish you found at that antique shop in Ipswich?”

It was, but she didn’t answer him.

Tucking his hands into his jacket pockets, he inched closer.

But not too close. He knew her better than that.

“What are you doing here?” Rose asked, glaring over his shoulder towards the kitchen.

Where the hell was Everly?

“I, uh… I wanted to talk to you,” he said. “If you have time.”

“I don’t.”

He nodded once. “Okay, then how about tomorrow?”

“I’m busy then too.”

“Then—”

“Stop it, Pete,” Rose snapped. “Whatever you have to say to me, it doesn’t matter. I don’t need closure, I don’t need an apology, I don’t need some half assed, lame excuse for why you cheated on me and fucked off to Maine. I don’t need any of it, so just—”

“My mom is sick,” he cut in, voice much gentler than she’d ever expect.

That banked Rose’s anger.

Pete glanced at the floor. “Stage four pancreatic cancer.”

The earth rocked under her feet.

Diane had always been kind to Rose. She’d been so excited to help plan the wedding, and when things fell apart, she’d sent her flowers and a card that held more of an apology than Pete ever gave.

“She’s, uh… She’s hanging in there,” he continued. “But they’re getting her set up with hospice care this week. The doctors say it won’t be much longer.”

Her stomach twisted. “I’m so sorry, Pete.”

Running a hand over his beard, he nodded. “We’ve been getting everything in order, you know? Arrangements for her funeral and her assets. It’s a lot.”

She could feel him building up to something and her breathing faltered.

“That’s why I wanted to talk to you,” he said, lifting his gaze to hers. Reaching into his back pocket, he withdrew a folded up envelope. “Before you freak out, this isn’t a check.”

Rose would have chuckled if she didn’t feel like cinderblocks were pressing into her sternum.

“It’s a proposal, of sorts.”

Her stare hardened at the word, and he winced.

“Sorry, I meant—Christ,” he muttered, scratching the back of his neck. “It’s an offer. I had my buddy write it up, so it wasn’t just me rambling on a sticky note.”

Frowning, she watched his hands smooth out the envelope before he stepped forward to give it to her.

“An offer for what?” She asked, staring down at the deep crease in the paper.

He’d had this in his pocket for a while.

Pete took a deep breath. “For me to invest in the Whittaker.”

For the second time in two minutes, the earth rocked under her feet.

It was almost enough to give her vertigo.

“You…” She shook her head. “You want to…”

“I know, talk about coming out of left field,” he said, attempting some levity. “I guess people were right about that whole ‘death changes you’ thing.”

Rose looked from Pete to the envelope and then back to Pete.

“I don’t think—”

“Wait,” he stopped her, holding up a hand and taking a couple steps forward. “Before you make your decision, read that offer, look over the numbers, and let me take you to dinner to discuss it all in detail.”

Rose scowled. “Dinner?”

“A *business* dinner,” he corrected. “My buddy said that’s how these things are usually done. Apparently it’s easier to talk about percentages and interest rates when you’ve got a good steak in front of you.”

“Pete—”

“Or pasta,” he offered. “I know you’re a little iffy about red meat.”

Taking a moment to steady herself, she tilted her head. “I don’t know.”

“It’s just one dinner,” he said. “No ulterior motives, nothing funny.”

Searching his face, she noted how exhausted he looked. Weary in a way that only grief could do to a person.

“Why?” She held his stare. “Why do you want to invest in my inn?”

Emotion flickered in his eyes. “I let my ego get the better of me and I ruined the best thing in my life because I couldn’t handle you putting so much of yourself into this place.”

His honesty was a swift blow.

It was the most self-aware thing he’d ever said to her.

“The Whittaker was your dream, your passion, and I tried to steal that joy from you,” Pete continued. “I was jealous of a goddamn inn. It was

petty and mean and I don’t deserve your forgiveness for what I put you through. But maybe this can be a good start at apologizing.”

When all she could do was stare, he huffed out a laugh.

“I, uh… I started going to therapy,” he said. “It’s rocked my shit, I’ll tell you that much.”

“That’s…” She leveled her gaze on him. “I think that’s a good call.”

Pete smirked. “I figured you would.”

Heavy footsteps from the dining room announced Derek moments before Rose spotted him from the corner of her eye.

“Hey, sorry I’m starting late, I was talking to—” He halted as soon as he saw Pete, bright blue eyes flashing with anger. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Pete held up his hands in a half surrender, half placating motion. “I just wanted to talk to Rose.”

“I think you’ve done enough talking, don’t you?”

Rose moved closer to her brother. “That’s not what this was about.”

Derek ignored her, fixated on Pete. “I tolerated you at the hardware store ‘cause I had no other choice, but you’ve got some nerve showing up here uninvited.”

As Pete attempted to explain, Rose got between the two men.

“Der,” she snapped, the one syllable yanking her brother like an invisible leash.

His stare locked onto hers, silently questioning.

Dipping her chin in a subtle nod, she told him it was okay. He didn’t have to throw anyone out or throw any punches.

Straightening to his full height, Derek scowled down at the man he used to consider a friend.

“I’m going to go grab my tools from the truck,” he said to Rose.

Pete inched back. “Don’t worry, I’ll be gone in a minute.”

With an expression like thunder, Derek strode past him. “You better be.”

The slam of the employee exit door made them both jerk.

Scratching the back of his neck, Pete said, “I think that’s my cue.”

Rose didn’t argue.

Halfway across the lobby, he turned. “I meant what I said, Rose. I know I’ll never be able to make up for what I did, but I want to try. And I can’t think of anyone who deserves this money more than you.”

Beneath his words, in the timbre of his voice, she heard what he didn’t dare say aloud.

I still love you.

It threatened to tear her heart in half.

“I’ll see you later,” he murmured, and left before she could say anything in return.

* * * * * * *

When Rose was in middle school, she’d had several instances of walking into the cafeteria, only to have tables of her classmates go awkwardly, suspiciously silent as she passed.

Usually it was because of a rumor spread about her by one of the school’s mean girls, or an uncomfortable stain on her clothing.

Those instances were embarrassing, but eventually built character.

Walking into the Whittaker’s kitchen, only for it to go completely silent was just plain embarrassing. No character building in sight.

“Alright, get it out,” Rose sighed, gesturing at Everly and Derek.

They both looked at each other before simultaneously blurting out string after string of questions.

“What was he doing?”

“What the hell did he want?”

“Did he really just drop in like that?”

“He wasn’t trying to win you back, was he?”

“Was he apologetic?”

“Was he *high*?”

Rose shuffled to the coffee maker, pulling out a clean mug and pouring her fourth cup of the day.

“From the top,” she said. “He wanted to talk to me, he knew stopping in was a risk, he wasn’t trying to win me back, he was actually very apologetic, no he wasn’t high.” She took a long sip. “He wants to invest in the Whittaker.”

“*What?*” Everly and Derek yelled at the same time.

Rose’s lashes fluttered, jarred by the noise.

“You told him to fuck off, right?” Everly said. When Derek gaped at her, she shrugged. “You were thinking it too.”

“I didn’t tell him anything,” she said. “He wants me to think it over and…”

Derek crossed his arms. “And what?”

Was it too late for her to disappear into the dunes, never to be seen again?

“He wants to take me to dinner—”

“No,” Derek cut in roughly.

“—To discuss the terms of his investment,” Rose finished, tone clipped.

Everly scowled. “He’s got some nerve.”

“That’s what I said,” Derek told her, bumping her elbow with his.

Rose eyed them for a beat over the rim of her cup.

“You’re going to tell him no,” Everly said, pulling down several pans to use for dinner prep. “Right? Of course you’ll say no.”

She stayed silent.

“Rose?” Derek stared expectantly.

She glanced into her half-drunk coffee. “I don’t know yet.”

Their silence was somehow worse than their explosive outrage.

“Why?” Everly asked finally.

“Because I’ve been staring at our bills all month and the idea of having more money to cover some of these things, to expand and hire more full time staff, isn’t terrible.”

“But it’s Pete,” she pushed. “Of all people—”

“I know,” Rose sighed. “But he literally showed up on our doorstep offering a lump sum. The least I can do is hear him out.”

“No, the least you can do is tell him to hit bricks,” Derek said, derision etched into his features.

Rose glared at him. “Says the guy who played nice with Pete at the hardware store a month ago.”

“That was different. We were in public,” he argued. “I’m not clocking him one standing in line for register three.”

Making a noise at the back of her throat, Everly tilted her head. “You should’ve.”

“And who’s paying that bail price? You?” Derek teased, glancing down at her.

“Maybe.” She smirked up at him. “But I’d probably let you sweat for a night or two.”

“How generous.”

Rose finished her coffee and toyed with the handle of the mug. “Derek, Everly and I need to have an owners’ meeting.”

It was code they'd used ever since they opened the inn. If they needed to discuss something urgent or private or even gossip-y, they knew the phrase would get most people out of their hair.

Most.

"What do you have to talk about that you can't say in front of me?" Derek asked, offended he was getting booted from the room.

Rose sighed. "If I told you what we were going to talk about, it wouldn't be a private conversation now would it?"

"But—"

Everly cut him off with a gentle nudge to his side. "We don't need you being the big bad brother while we're talking about business arrangements," she said. "Now go finish repairing that shower head."

Making a disgruntled noise at the back of his throat, Derek relented. "Fine. But I'm coming back here for a brownie when I'm done."

"A perfectly reasonable trade," she said with a nod.

They waited until he was out of the kitchen and then an extra four seconds to make sure he wasn't eavesdropping before Rose broke the silence.

"I made out with Adam."

Everly dropped her cutting board. "Oh my God, is that why your hair looks different?"

"Is it that obvious?" She asked, smoothing her hand over her long waves.

"Only to the trained eye," she said. Rushing around the prep station, she continued. "Tell me every single thing. How did it start? What was it like? Was it everything you hoped? Where is Adam right now?"

"You're really into the rapid fire questions today," Rose said with a smirk.

“I had some chocolate while I was baking,” she said. “Now spill.”

Leaning back against the counter, Rose murmured, “It was…”

Her skin tingled with the memory of Adam’s kiss, his hands on her, his searing gaze as he—

She cleared her throat. “It was so much more than I was expecting.”

Clapping a hand over her mouth, Everly suppressed her squeak of delight.

“This is the best thing ever,” she exclaimed, beaming. “So does this mean—”

“I don’t know what it means,” Rose cut in with a sigh. “We were making out in Room Five, and before I knew it we were interrupted by my ex-fiancé.”

Everly’s smile wilted. “Yeah, that’s… not ideal.”

Withdrawing the envelope from her pocket, she plucked at the wrinkled corner. “I haven’t looked at this yet.”

Stepping closer, Everly ask, “Together?”

Rose nodded at her best friend.

No matter what, they were a team.

Ripping the envelope, she yanked the paperwork out and unfolded it.

Her stomach twisted at the sight of Pete’s handwriting, but she ignored the feeling.

“Official lawyer letterhead,” Everly commented. “I think that’s a good sign.”

Scanning the offer letter and the proof of funds statement from his bank, Rose’s gaze landed on the amount, and she froze.

“Holy shit.”

Craning her neck, Everly read along. “What? What did he—Oh my God!”

“Fifty thousand dollars,” Rose breathed. “Pete wants to invest fifty thousand dollars in the Whittaker.”

“Where the hell did he get fifty grand?”

Another knot wrenched in her gut, and she winced.

“Pete’s back in East Cove because his mom is sick,” she said. “Dying, actually.”

Everly’s soft gasp seemed so much louder in the quiet kitchen.

“I think this must be…” She glanced at his signature at the bottom of the page. “His inheritance.”

“Don’t people normally get their inheritance when the person passes? Not before?”

Rose tilted her head in thought. “Yeah, but Diane’s sentimental. She probably gave the money to Pete now so she could know what he’d use it for.” Her throat tightened as she added, “She’s always liked knowing she could help people.”

They were silent for several beats, and Rose felt the weight of Everly’s stare on her.

“I’m sorry,” she finally said. “I know she’s not your mother-in-law but… she was going to be. This must be really hard.”

“It’s… a lot,” Rose admitted.

She barely had time to look up before she was getting pulled into a tight hug, wrapped in warmth and the scent of snickerdoodles and vanilla conditioner.

“Do you want Derek’s brownie?” Everly asked into her hair. “I’ll tell him I accidentally knocked it into the trash.”

Chuckling, Rose nodded. “Yes, please.”

“You got it.”

* * * * * * *

Pushing the housekeeping cart back into the upstairs closet, Adam glanced around.

He was pretty sure he’d done everything needed, but maybe he should ask Lex to double check.

Honestly, he wasn’t sure he cared if he missed something. All he could think about was Rose and getting back to her.

She’d said she’d come back, but he knew her well enough to know she’d probably gotten caught up with a new task and forgot.

Taking the stairs, he smiled as he spotted her behind the desk, talking on the phone.

“Absolutely, Mrs. Galvin, we’d be more than happy to… Mhm hm, yes, of course… No that’s not a problem at all, we can…”

Whoever she was speaking with must’ve been irritating, as her forehead was wrinkled in the way that told him she was get very, very frustrated.

Rose glanced up as he approached and flashed a tight smile.

Jolting, she did a double take and motioned for him.

“Sure thing, Mrs. Galvin, I’ll send over that corrected estimate right now,” Rose said, already trying to walk away from the landline. “Thank you so much. Have a great day.”

Hanging up, she circled the desk and grabbed Adam’s forearm.

“Oh my God, I’m the worst—the actual worst,” she blurted out. “I left you upstairs to finish cleaning. I totally forgot, I—”

He stopped her self-flagellation by cupping her chin and kissing her fully, smiling against her lips.

Rose instantly relaxed against him, and his chest inflated with the knowledge that he was able to do that for her.

Taking him by his other hand, she broke away. “Wait, wait. Uh…” She looked over her shoulder. “Come with me.”

Adam would go anywhere she wanted if it meant he could keep kissing her.

He didn’t know what was so special about the downstairs utility closet though.

Dragging him inside, Rose shut the door behind them, barricading them with utter darkness.

“Oh, oops, hang on,” she muttered, fumbling with something above them.

A click was followed by a flare of light—Oh, the hanging bulb.

Blinking, he smiled down at her. *“What are we doing in here?”*

“I…” Rose blushed, laughing softly. “I’m not actually sure. I guess I just thought making out again in the lobby wouldn’t seem very professional.”

The need in his chest sparked and he reached for her.

Leaning down, he slanted his lips over hers and relished the otherworldly sensations that spun and danced over his skin.

Had kissing always been like this for him?

Adam didn’t care. He felt it now, with Rose, and he wasn’t giving that up for anything.

Sure, soft hands clasped his jaw, the back of his neck, his hair—holding him wherever she could as he deepened the kiss much in the same way she’d done earlier.

At least he was a fast learner.

Wrapping his arms around her, he gave her something strong to bend against as she arched. The soft whimper that escaped her sent liquid heat straight to his lower belly, and he wanted her to make that sound over and over and over.

Finding the strokes of his tongue, the pressure of his lips, and the edge of his teeth that Rose liked was the best treasure hunt of all, and once he knew the secret to pleasing her, he didn't stop.

His entire body felt consumed by a fire he never wanted to put out.

Would she let him kiss her elsewhere?

Would she let him touch her?

A deep, primal part of his brain knew all the ways he could be with Rose—knew all the ways they could fit together and chase that intense high together.

That same part of his brain begged to do such things now, here in the utility closet with just an unlocked door securing their privacy.

It was probably a bad idea.

Definitely a bad idea.

Adam didn't care though.

Skimming his hands over her waist, he gripped her hips and pressed his thigh between hers.

Rose's muffled groan threatened to drive him to madness.

More, more, more…

She rocked against him, and his chest rumbled with satisfaction.

He'd heard Everly talk about 'muscle memory'—the idea that the body remembered how to do something even if the brain didn't—and in this moment, he knew without a doubt his body remembered this.

Remembered what it felt like to hold a lover. To be entangled with them in every way. To bring them to new heights of desire.

And he wanted that memory—of both his mind and body—with Rose.

"A-Adam," she panted against his bottom lip. "We should…"

He dropped to suck a mark just behind her ear and her words died on her tongue.

She smelled incredible, like light florals and something headier that he couldn't place.

Finding a freckle on the side of her throat, he traced it with his lips and smiled as she pressed into him.

"How are you so good at this?" She asked, quiet and breathless.

Adam nipped her collarbone and chuckled—a light rasp of a sound.

Sinking her hand into his hair, Rose tugged and the fire in his blood doubled.

He wanted her to do that again, while he was kissing ever single inch of her and making her cry out.

She rolled her hips against his thigh, seeking friction, and he was desperate to feel her without so many layers of clothing between them.

Her breathing hitched and on instinct he knew to press into her more.

"Fuck," she hissed against the top of his head. "Adam… I'm—" She gulped down air. "We should… Wait…"

Wait.

Wait?

Adam stilled all movement but didn't release her.

Not that she would have let him, as her hands were deeply twisted in his hair and not letting go.

Angling his head to look at her, he arched an eyebrow.

“I know, I know, I’m sorry,” she said, squeezing her eyes shut and shaking her head. “I didn’t mean to—”

He bumped the tip of her nose with his, smiling when she blinked up at him.

“It’s okay. I’m not mad,” he signed sloppily with one hand.

Rose inhaled deeply. “I just… I think we should maybe talk?”

He stared expectantly at her.

“Just so we’re on the same page about… this.”

Adam smirked.

If ‘this’ was being with her, they were definitely on the same page.

“It’s maybe a little irresponsible to go from our first kiss to me climbing you like a tree in the span of a couple hours,” she said, huffing out a laugh.

He wasn’t sure what that meant but he didn’t see a problem with it at all.

Rose stared up at him with the loveliest dazed expression.

“The way you’re looking at me though is making it very hard to pump the brakes.”

Funny, he could say the same thing about her.

Kissing her once, twice more, Adam reluctantly pulled his hands away from her curves.

“Nothing in me wants to stop,” he signed. *“But if you want to talk, we can talk.”* Glancing around them, he added, *“Did you want to stay in here for that, or…?”*

“Oh, no, we don’t need to…” She brushed a few strands of hair off her forehead. “I’m not even sure why I picked the closet. We could have just gone to your room.”

The heat in his core spiked at the thought of doing everything they just did but spread across his bed.

“Not like that,” she teased, poking him in the ribs.

Adam grinned. She knew him *very* well.

Framing his face with both hands, she kissed him, warm and sweet like his favorite hot chocolate.

“But… maybe like that… at some point,” she said between kisses. “Soon. Very soon.”

He nodded like the eager, lust drunk man he was.

“Here, take this,” she said, snagging a couple rolls of toilet paper off the shelf behind him. “Just in case someone sees us.”

“Why would I care if someone saw us?”

“It’s just easier to pretend we were getting something for a guest,” she said, grabbing a few folded towels and tucking them into her arm.

Shrugging, he didn’t argue. Rose knew more about this kind of thing anyway.

Cracking open the door, she peeked out before giving him a nod and stepping into the hallway. He followed close behind, mostly because he already missed her absence.

“I think the coast is clear,” she whispered over her shoulder. “We should be—”

“How much will you hate me if I tell you that showerhead needs to be replaced?” Derek called from the stairs, his heavy boots thudding as he approached.

Rose fumbled with the towels in her arms. “I—What?”

“I can run out and get a spare,” Derek continued. “It won’t take long.”

“Okay, yeah, sure. That’s fine.”

Setting his toolbox next to the front desk, he narrowed his gaze on his sister and then on Adam.

"Why are you so jumpy?"

Rose shook her head. "I'm not."

"And why does your face look like that?"

Adam glanced at her, and the memories of what they'd just done flooded his mind.

Her lips were tinged a deep pink and swollen, her cheeks still flushed, and the left side of her neck was marked by his eager attention and the light bit of stubble he hadn't shaved off that morning.

A possessive side of himself he'd yet to encounter reared up with pride.

She looked like *his*.

Rose waved her brother's question away. "It's been a long day, Der. Go pester someone else."

"Fine, fine," Derek muttered. "I'll be back in thirty minutes."

He strode out the back exit right as a group of new guests entered the lobby, suitcases in hand.

Rose gave him an apologetic smile. "I have to—"

"I know, it's okay," he signed. *"I'll go set up the café for dinner."*

"What would I do without you," she said softly, and the words hit him squarely in the sternum.

Funny, he thought the same thing about her.

Chapter Fifteen

Sharpening one of the graphite pencils Lex had gifted him, Adam's gaze flicked between his unfinished sketch and the nautilus shell sitting on his desk.

It looked like a normal shell—there was nothing inside it or written on it. It didn't open or make noise or do anything else unusual.

He'd asked Zoey if shells were used for anything special, and all she could come up with was that some were used as decorations and jewelry. Neither of those things seemed to be the purpose of the shell his maybe-sister gave him.

Shaking himself, Adam refocused on the drawing in front of him.

It was a grey scale depiction of Everly in the kitchen, laughing at something Derek had said to her.

He liked Everly's laugh. It was loud and bright and shook her whole body with joy.

As he added in details around her face, a light rattling sound caught his attention.

Glancing up, he scanned the room.

The noise stopped.

Adjusting his hold on the pencil, he went back to shading a few of Everly's curls that had escaped her headscarf at her temples.

The rattling returned.

What is that? He frowned, looking down at the floor.

Was he kicking something he couldn't see? Was there a loose screw in the heating vent?

As he twisted in his seat, the sound intensified.

Finally, he saw something vibrate on his desk and he froze.

It was the nautilus shell.

With wide eyes, he watched as it shook, moving only a centimeter or two across the stained wooden surface.

I pray you'll remember how to use it, Odette's voice echoed in his head.

Setting his pencil down, Adam stared at the small, trembling shell.

Eventually it stopped, but he never took his eyes off it for fear of missing something else unnerving about it.

Leaning down until his chin was almost touching the desk, he waited.

And waited.

Nothing. It didn't move again.

Gathering his nerves, he reached out and poked the shell with his index finger, rocking it slightly. He decided since it hadn't exploded or started talking to him, it was safe enough to pick up. Holding it in his palm, he braced himself for some bizarre reaction that still never came.

I don't know what you are, he thought. *Or what I'm supposed to do with you. All I know is, you were given to me by someone who thinks they're my sister.*

Before he could put the nautilus down, it buzzed in his hand, and Adam gaped.

Can… Can you understand me?

Again, it vibrated.

His eyes widened even more. How was he supposed to tell Rose about this?

I think I'm hallucinating, he thought, scratching his eyebrow.

It shook as if to confirm he was not, in fact, imagining things.

Standing, Adam paced the length of his room several times.

I don't… I don't know what to do. If this shell is some sort of… magical thing that can read my mind, then how does it work? Is someone else connected to it?

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

Is… Odette connected to it?

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

Frustration coursed through his body.

If you really are my sister, why didn't you come for me sooner? Why didn't you tell me what happened? Where were you when I was hurt and lost?

The shell vibrated non-stop for twenty seconds, as if someone was trying to respond.

I don't understand what this is, he thought, glaring at the orange stripes long the curve. *I don't know how to use it. You could have just told me—*

The buzzing turned agitated, nearly leaping from his palm.

I have no memories, don't you understand that? He shouted in his mind. *Everything I know is what happened to me when the ocean gave me up—spat me onto those rocks and left me for dead. I don't remember anything about my life before.*

For the first time in several minutes, the shell was completely still.

I'm not afraid to learn about my past, he thought, reigning in his anger. *But for some reason you're afraid to tell me. Why?*

The nautilus didn't even twitch.

Scowling, he clenched his fist around it.

Fine. If that's how you want to be…

Adam turned, ready to toss the damn thing into the garbage.

Before he could, the swirling void in the back of his mind swelled and undulated, and pain lanced through his skull.

Squeezing his eyes shut, he breathed through the ache.

The faintest urge nudged at him, begging him not to throw it away.

Moving against the current of anger inside him, Adam put the shell safely on the desk and backed away.

If Odette was behind this, he wanted answers.

He hated to admit it, but part of him hoped he saw her again soon.

* * * * * * *

"I just think if we did a full Easter brunch, we'd get a lot of business," Everly said.

Sending out the next confirmation email on her list, Rose nodded as she half listened.

"Oyster and Pearl does an Easter lunch, The Red Barn does a dinner, and at least three other places offer catering," Everly continued, leaning against the desk as she counted on her fingers. "It seems like a huge missed opportunity if we skip it."

"Mhm hm."

Rose scanned the notes for their luxury suite—a honeymoon trip for a couple from New Mexico. She'd be sure roses and champagne were sent to their room upon check in.

"And my mom offered us a crate of her specialty jams and jellies, so you know I could whip up a few fun springtime dishes."

Scribbling on a Post-It note, she made a to-do list for the landscaping at the front of the inn. The new gardening company she'd hired would be there any minute and—

"Rose."

She jerked her head up. "Yeah?"

“Are you even listening to me?” Everly planted a hand on her hip.

“Easter brunch, special jams, Oyster and Pearl?”

Rolling her eyes, Everly sighed, “Well you got two out of three I guess.”

“Ev, if you want to do an Easter brunch, I don’t see why we shouldn’t,” Rose said, finishing her list and sticking it to the computer monitor. “Your new sous chef starts next week, right? So you’ll have more help than just our line cooks, and I’ll be available for service too.”

Clasping her hands together, she beamed and bounced a little on the balls of her feet. “Yay! Okay, I’ll go get started on the menu.”

Suspicion latched onto the back of Rose’s neck.

“Wait,” she called before Everly could disappear into the café.

Turning back slowly, she stared at her with as much innocence as she could muster.

“You hate brunch,” Rose said, pointing at her with her pen. “You hate it so much, you swore you’d never work another brunch shift again in your life.”

“I did not.”

“You also said brunch was just for lazy booze hounds who couldn’t be bothered to get up early enough for breakfast or wait long enough to start drinking.”

Everly tried to wave her off. “I was just grumpy.”

“Then why did you tear up every suggestion card we’ve ever gotten asking if we’d open for brunch?” Rose arched an eyebrow. “While cackling.”

“Okay, first of all, I do not *cackle*,” Everly said. “And second of all, I’m allowed to change my mind.”

“Yes, you are,” she agreed. “But I still demand an explanation.”

When she only shifted her weight and adjusted her apron, Rose sighed.

“This is a money grab, isn’t it?” She tossed her pen back into the Whittaker Inn mug that held a dozen more. “You’re trying to drum up more business because of Pete’s offer.”

Everly’s soft features pinched as she strode forward. “I was just trying to come up with ways to help that wouldn’t include taking an investment from your ex.”

Heart warmed and a little sad, Rose ducked her head. “That’s really sweet, but—”

“We don’t need his money,” she urged, stepping closer. “Would fifty thousand dollars be incredible? Of course it would. But this is Pete we’re talking about.”

The center of Rose’s chest ached.

“Maybe he means well, and maybe this isn’t some big ploy to win you back, but he proved he isn’t trustworthy,” Everly said. “He couldn’t keep a commitment to you, the woman he loved. How are we supposed to believe that he’ll keep his commitment to being a silent investor?”

Taking a deep breath, she held it for a beat before releasing it slowly.

“I know,” Rose murmured. “But you didn’t see him. It was like he was a different person. He’s even going to therapy. That has to say something about his renewed character.”

“Therapy is for self-improvement and to heal past wounds. It isn’t a bargaining chip to use when surprising your ex.”

Rose pressed her lips into a flat line. She wasn’t wrong, but Rose couldn’t yield.

“I know that,” she said. “But you’re the one always spouting off about giving people second and third chances.”

“That’s for when someone gets snippy in the grocery line or mistakenly takes your coffee order instead of theirs,” Everly argued. “Not your shithead ex-fiancé who broke your heart and now wants a do-over.”

The floorboards creaked behind Rose and her heart plummeted into her gut.

She knew before she even turned around.

Everly’s wide gaze shifting over her shoulder only confirmed it.

Facing him, she winced. “Adam.”

Confusion laced with hurt darkened his stare. *“Pete… wants a do-over?”*

Quickly, she shook her head. “No, that’s not—It isn’t what that sounds like.”

“Okay,” he signed.

When he didn’t continue, Rose glanced to Everly before speaking.

“Pete… Came by the inn.” Her throat tightened but she pushed on. “He made an offer to help us financially.”

Some of the shadows in his eyes faded but his brow furrowed deeply. *“Oh. Why would he do that?”*

Rose shrugged slightly. “I think to try to make up for what he did,” she said. “It might be his way of apologizing.”

“Nothing can really make up for how he hurt you,” Adam signed.

Everly leaned around Rose’s shoulder. “That’s what I said.”

“I know,” she sighed. “But I think it means something that he’s trying at all.”

Adam glanced around the room. *“Is he still here?”*

“Oh, no, he came by a couple days ago,” Everly said with a wave of her hand.

Confusion and hurt sharpened into anger in his violet eyes.

“A couple days?” He held Rose’s stare. *“And you didn’t tell me?”*

“Oops,” Everly breathed behind her.

Shaking her head, Rose took half a step closer to him. “I wasn’t hiding it from you—”

“But you didn’t tell me,” he reiterated. *“Why? Did you think you couldn’t trust me?”*

“Of course not, Adam,” she said, wanting nothing more than to take his hand but sensing that wouldn’t help matters. “I was just… shocked and trying to process it all. I needed to think.”

“You could have done that ***with*** *me,”* he signed with agitation. *“I can handle things, you know. You don’t have to keep secrets just because you think I need protecting. My mind isn’t completely warped, I can comprehend difficult problems.”*

Rose gaped, her chest aching worse and worse by the second.

His undercurrent of energy told her something else was fueling his anger, but she had no idea what it could be.

“I never thought you couldn’t handle it,” she said, keeping her tone even. “I was just trying to wrap my own mind around what Pete was offering.”

Adam’s glare intensified at the mention of him, and Rose wished she could erase it from the air between them.

“You shut me out. Again. After I thought we were past that,” he signed. *“Whether you want to admit it or not, that says something about how you see me.”*

Circling the desk, Adam strode through the dining room and into the kitchen, leaving them in an echoing silence.

After a tense forty seconds, Everly faced her. “I’m so sorry. This was all my fault. I thought—”

“No, it’s not,” Rose cut her off gently. “He’s right. I should have told him.” Raking her fingers through her hair, she added, “Fuck, why didn’t I tell him?”

Making a thoughtful noise at the back of her throat, Everly said, “Because he’s your fresh start, and tarnishing him with anything related to your past just feels wrong?”

Blinking, she stared at her best friend in earnest.

“You’re supposed to warn someone before you take an expert marksman shot at their subconscious like that.”

“Sorry,” Everly said, flashing a weak smile. “I’ll keep Adam in the kitchen with me for a while. He always feels better after baking a bunch of chocolate chip cookies. Probably because he eats half the chocolate chips.”

Nodding, Rose thanked her. “I’ll… give him some space, I guess.”

Rubbing her arm, Everly said, “Don’t worry. It’s Adam. He could never stay angry with you. I bet something happened and this just got under his skin. I’ll talk to him and see what I can find out.”

As she turned, Rose ignored the pinpricks of hot tears in the corners of her eyes.

What had she done?

* * * * * * *

It started with the honeymooners arguing in the lobby.

Rose wasn’t sure what they were fighting about, but she knew enough about body language and tense voices barely kept quiet to know it must’ve been bad.

Then a couple in the café left in a huff, abandoning their half-eaten food.

A clattering of silverware was followed by a woman loudly accusing her boyfriend of cheating on her.

Creeping towards the dining area entryway, Rose scanned the room with a cautious eye.

Like sequential firecrackers, spats broke out around the inn.

Panicked, their server Becca hurried to her, blonde ponytail swinging behind her as she practically trotted across the room.

“I think we have a problem,” she said, glancing over her shoulder as someone cursed at their brother.

“I see that,” Rose said. “What started it?”

Becca shook her head. “I have no idea. One minute everyone was enjoying their meals, the next they’re picking fights and pointing fingers and—Oh God, that woman is taking her wedding ring off.”

“Okay, uh…” Rose guided her to the edge of the front desk. “Stay here while I go talk to Everly.”

“This isn’t some kind of mass hysteria is it?”

“Did you tell them something that would make them hysterical?”

“No,” Becca said.

Rose attempted to smile. “Then we should be fine. Wait here.”

Traversing the dining room, she eavesdropped on every table she passed, hoping to understand what had gotten under everyone’s skin.

All she gathered, however, was the amount of women doubting their husbands’ fidelity could keep East Cove’s most successful divorce attorney busy for several years.

The kitchen was a strange port in a verbally tumultuous storm.

Everyone was calm, chatting lightly as they prepped produce and washed dishes.

Standing at the stove, Everly was in the zone, firing several dishes at once and adjusting what was needed for the next round.

“Um, Ev?” Rose called, excusing herself as she squeezed by Chuck, one of the line cooks. “Is everything okay back here?”

Without looking up, Everly nodded. “Of course. Why wouldn’t it be?”

Sidling up to her friend, Rose dropped her voice. “Because literally everyone in the dining room is thirty seconds away from forking their spouse’s eyes out.”

“What?” Everly almost dropped her spoon.

“They’re fighting,” she said. “They’re all fighting. Every single person out there is ruining their relationship and demanding the wills to be rewritten. What the hell did you put in the food?”

Everly floundered, looking back and forth between the dishes on the stove to Rose and back.

“No-nothing,” she cried. “I mean, nothing I wasn’t supposed to. Everything was made correctly and there was no cross-contamination. All of our dishes were sanitized and the dates on our sauces and produce were well within range—”

“I’m not accusing you of giving people salmonella, I’m asking if you… Well, I don’t know exactly.” Rose looked to the kitchen door. “Used recipes known to make people angry as fuck?”

Flushed and wide-eyed, Everly stared up at her. “Are you suggesting I hexed dinner service?”

“No, no, I…” She shrugged. “I mean…”

“Rose!”

“Well did you?”

Turning the heat down on one of the eyes, Everly said, “This is awfully rich coming from little miss ‘the idea of mermaids is too farfetched.’ Now you’re coming in here and accusing me of magical food poisoning.”

“Ev, all I know is it’s bad, bad vibes out there and I don’t know what’s caused it, so unless we have a gas leak—”

Everly whirled, grabbing Rose’s arm. “Adam.”

“What?”

“Adam was helping. He wanted to learn more than just baking, so Chuck and I were teaching him. He helped prep all the meat for tonight.” She wrung the hem of her apron in her hands. “What if—”

“Now you’re accusing *Adam* of magically poisoning the food?” Rose’s features pinched. “This is insane.”

“You just did the same thing to me,” Everly exclaimed.

Gesturing vaguely, Rose said, “Statistically speaking, if it was going to be one of us, it would be you.”

“I’m offended, but we’ll get back to that later,” she said. “What do we do now?”

Rose mentally grappled for an answer.

They didn’t cover accidental energy manipulation in business school.

“Uhh, okay, let’s see.” She glanced around the room. “Did Adam help make the desserts for tonight?”

“Only the double chocolate cookies,” Everly said.

Nodding, Rose said, “Great. Start plating every single dessert option we have and brewing more coffee and hot tea. We’ll pass out

complimentary desserts and I'll change the playlist out there to something calming. Maybe that will shift people's moods."

"And if it doesn't?"

She tossed her hands up. "I guess I'll start hiding all the sharp objects."

Hurrying back towards the door, she turned. "Don't let Adam help with anything else. And think happy thoughts."

"Okay, *Tinker Bell*."

"Yeah, I deserved that."

Emerging back into the chaos of the dining room, Rose dodged a flung soup spoon.

"At least it wasn't a steak knife, I guess," she muttered to herself.

Returning to the desk as quickly as she could, she told Becca to go back to the kitchen and start bringing out the desserts and tea.

After changing the music and dimming the lights just a notch or two, she realized she hadn't seen Adam since earlier that day.

With a nervous, skipping heart, she strode to his door and knocked.

Rose waited.

And waited.

There was no answer.

She knocked again, but she didn't hear movement inside or see the glimmer of a lamp under the door.

"Adam?"

Nothing.

Worry flooded her as she rushed outside.

Had Odette returned? Someone else? Was Adam hurt?

Searching the entire perimeter of the Whittaker proved futile. He wasn't anywhere on the grounds. She even searched the hedges, the lane,

and the main street and sidewalk.

Rose called for him again, but all she heard was the rush of the ocean.

He was gone.

* * * * * * *

Approaching the cottage door, Adam tucked a stray lock of hair behind his ear and stared down at the pathway barely lit by moonlight.

He hadn't meant to be gone all evening, and the guilt outweighed his waning frustration.

After helping Everly in the kitchen, he'd been hit with a blinding headache that nothing seemed to ease, even drawing. As a last resort, he went for a long walk on the beach, hoping the cool air and beautiful sunset colors would soothe him.

By some miracle, it worked, and in his relief he sat down near the edge of the dunes and watched as the world was enveloped in night and pinprick stars.

He may have fallen asleep as well.

Pausing at Rose's doormat, he shifted his weight.

Maybe he should do this in the morning. It was late and he was certain she'd be exhausted—she might even be asleep already.

Sighing, he looked back over his shoulder.

He didn't need to talk to her tonight. He could—

A muffled clang he recognized as cutlery falling in a sink made him jerk.

She was awake.

And… doing dishes?

Steeling himself, Adam knocked softly.

The door swung open much faster than he anticipated.

Standing in a black tank top and pink silk shorts, with bright yellow rubber gloves covering both arms to her elbows, Rose stared up at him in silence.

Adam's heart kicked in his chest.

"I wasn't angry at you," he signed in lieu of a greeting. *"I mean, maybe I was. A little. But I was really angry with my sister."* He frowned. *"My maybe-sister. And my family, whoever they are. I feel like I'm being kept in the dark, but I don't remember anything to help me figure out what's being kept from me."*

Rose blinked, paying close attention to every movement of his hands.

"I thought you kept the thing about Pete from me because you didn't think I could handle it, just like how Odette seems to view me about whatever she's hiding. And I blamed your…" He paused to think. *"The way you withdraw sometimes. That wasn't fair. You've never intentionally hurt me, and I shouldn't have lashed out at you like that."*

In the light from her cottage, he could see her eyes shining with emotion.

"I'm sorry," he signed. *"I hope you can for—"*

Rose launched herself at him, wrapping her arms around his neck and squeezing so tightly he nearly winced.

"I was so worried," she said into his hair. "I tried to find you, but I didn't know where you'd go, and then I thought something happened to you and you were hurt, but I had no way of getting in touch with you and—Tomorrow we're getting you a cell phone. I don't care what kind of fancy apps we have to download so you can use it, we're getting you the best disability accessible phone they have okay?"

He rocked back and forth, instinctively soothing her.

Nodding against her temple, he didn't pull away until she was ready to let him go.

"You're not mad at me?" He signed.

"Mad?" Rose yanked at the rubber gloves, fighting to get them off. "Why would I be mad at you? You had every right to be upset with me." Flinging one of the gloves off, it landed on her winter boots by the door. "I've been stress cleaning my whole place. I thought you'd gotten clipped by a truck or fell into the ocean again or—"

It was Adam's turn to lunge for her.

Gently grasping her face, he hauled her into a deep kiss that stole the air from their lungs.

Right there, with Rose's lips pressed to his, listening to her soft, pleased noises, he vowed never to go off without telling anyone ever again.

"I'm sorry," he mouthed, pulling back just enough to look into her eyes. *"I'm so sorry."*

Shaking her head, Rose kissed him once more and that time he felt her smiling.

"Are you hungry? Did you even have dinner?" She asked, yanking her other glove off and tossing it over her shoulder.

Adam shrugged. He really hadn't noticed if he was hungry or not, he'd been too preoccupied with his headache and the dread building inside him.

Taking his hand, Rose guided him inside her cottage.

"C'mon, I have leftovers that should still be edible."

As she padded to the kitchen, he trailed closely behind her only to stop several feet inside.

Her home was… *stunning*.

Plum walls were accented with eggshell trim and windowsills and delicate lace curtains. He was surprised he could even see the paint colors, as every wall was covered in framed art, wall hangings, and textured pieces he didn't have a name for but loved all the same.

A small teal sofa was stacked with pillows and throw blankets of all kinds, and scuffed end tables that maybe were gold once upon a time sat on either end. Some kind of paper-y folding screen divided the living room from Rose's bed, but he still spotted the colorful quilt and furry rug from where he stood.

Knick knacks covered all available spaces, and books overflowed her shelves until some had to be stacked on the floor. Her television was smaller than the one in his room but it fit across from the couch perfectly, and was framed by two narrow, tall oil paintings of humpback whales.

Adam was almost overwhelmed by how different this space was in comparison to the Whittaker.

They were both still Rose—warm, inviting, and unique—but this place… This was all the pieces of her she didn't allow others to see.

This was her heart.

"I have two slices of mushroom and pepperoni pizza or a half a container of some pesto mac'n'cheese Everly made," Rose called from her kitchen—a small corner in the far side of her cottage separated by a short countertop and a few dangling lights.

Adam turned in a slow circle, taking it all in.

"If those don't sound good, I can fix you up a homemade bowl of Honey Nut Cheerios," she added, smiling over her shoulder at him.

"This is your home?" He signed instead of answering about food.

Rose's smile wavered. "Yeah, I know it's a bit small—"

"It's perfect," he signed, cutting her off. *"It's… you."*

Just like their afternoon at the art gallery, Adam couldn't contain his excitement as he picked a wall and rushed to it, eager to examine all of the pieces hung up.

Some were framed family photos—Derek in a funny square hat with a tassel, Zoey as a little girl in denim overalls and a yellow sunhat, Rose's parents dancing and smiling lovingly at each other, Grampy on a boat and grinning ear to ear. Others were paintings of places he'd never seen and foreign landscapes, soft pink flowers, figures captured mid-movement.

A collection of metal objects caught his attention, and he leaned closer to inspect them.

"Those are antique door knockers," Rose said behind him. "They were what people used before doorbells came around."

A lion head, a hand with a fancy wrist cuff, a horse, and a funny looking man with leaves for hair were all artfully arranged in a cluster between framed art prints of old brick buildings.

Twine was pinned above her sofa with cards clipped to it, and he had to climb onto the couch just to read them. Holidays, birthdays, and special flat cards sent from places called 'California' and 'Iceland' were on display.

More textured pieces of woven and beaded yarn were tacked up on either side of a polished brass sunburst and matching crescent moon.

"You're really into all my art, huh," Rose murmured. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised."

Grinning, Adam turned and hopped down off her sofa. *"They're you."*

"Oh, no, I didn't make them."

He shook his head. *"They're **you**. They're things you love. Things you cherish."*

Rose's cheeks flushed. "I suppose you're right."

Placing a kiss on her forehead, he went to the next wall and repeated his enamored process. He wanted to take in every detail he could. Wanted to memorize the types and styles of artwork she favored over others.

He imagined this was as close as he could get to touring her mind, and he wanted to take advantage of such a gift.

When he was done, his face ached from smiling so much.

"I'm glad I thought to dust while I was stress cleaning," she said. "Otherwise you'd be distracted by all the cobwebs."

"Thank you," he signed. *"Thank you for letting me see you."*

Rose stilled, her lashes fluttering. "I… You're welcome."

Leaning down, Adam kissed her again, this time savoring the vulnerability warming her usually cool, harder edges.

She'd let him in. She cared about him.

He was almost afraid to hope that those things would lead to more.

Glancing down at her repurposed wood coffee table, something familiar caught his eye.

Smirking, he bent down and picked up one of the many sketches he'd given her with her morning coffee—the latest, of Zoey's pet fish.

"You kept them," he signed.

Rose rolled her eyes playfully. "Well, yeah, it would've been rude to toss them out."

They were all in a neat stack, like she'd wanted them safely in the same place.

"And," she added. "I like them. A lot." When he locked eyes with her, she said, "I was thinking of… maybe framing them."

Adam's brows shot up. *"To go here?"* He gestured to the walls of her home.

“No, to hang on all the parking meters downtown.” She laughed. “Of course here.”

The hammering in his chest sped up.

Rose didn’t just let him in, she was giving him a permanent place there.

“I… I want…” He looked around her living room, searching desperately for the things he needed. *“Can I do something?”*

“What?”

“I need paper and a pen,” he signed, putting the sketch back down on top of the pile.

Humming in thought, Rose wandered to one of her bookshelves and found a half used sketch pad and several yellow pencils.

“Will this work instead?”

Nodding, he took them and smiled as he guided her to her sofa.

“Sit down,” he signed. *“I’m going to draw you.”*

She halted. “Oh, Adam, no, that’s okay. You don’t—”

“I want to,” he urged. *“Please?”*

Rose glanced down at herself. “I’m not exactly photogenic right now.”

He wholeheartedly disagreed, and he was going to prove it.

Arching a brow, he smirked. *“Says you. Now sit.”*

Sighing deeply, she moved a few of her pillows and practically dropped onto the couch.

“Fine, draw me like one of your French girls,” she muttered, adjusting her position.

“I can tell that’s a quote from something,” he signed with a light rasping chuckle.

Dragging one of her straight back dinette chairs over, he angled it right where he needed and waited for Rose to stop fidgeting.

"What do I do?"

He tilted his head. *"Think of something you love,"* he signed. *"And focus your gaze right over… there."* He pointed about a foot to his right, over his shoulder.

It took her a little while to settle, but once she did, Adam got to work.

He tested the pencils before finally flipping to a clean sheet of paper and propping the sketchbook on his knee.

Following the lines of her face, he marked the page as he went and soon, Rose began to emerge from the shades of graphite.

As he was adding detailing around her brows and hairline, Adam saw the moment his instruction fully clicked in her mind.

Rose's gaze gentled, her lips parted a fraction and the muscles of her jaw relaxed.

And as Adam began shading those perfect lips, her stare shifted to him. He swore he felt it as if she'd touched him.

Heat pooled low in his belly, and he paused sketching to regain his composure.

That primal corner of his mind flared to life once more, confirming his body knew what his brain had unfortunately erased.

Not now, he told himself. *Don't ruin the moment.*

Swallowing thickly, he focused on the page.

Detailing the stray pieces of hair that had escaped the bun coiled on top of her head, he smiled.

"What?" Rose asked.

Adam shook his head, but she asked again.

Clamping his pencil between his teeth, he signed, *"You have one lock of hair on the right side of your face that always curls into a C shape. I think it's cute."*

"Are you telling me I have a cow lick?"

He shrugged. *"I don't know what that is, and you don't look like a cow licked you. But your hair is beautiful."*

"Well, you can thank my mother's genetics for that," she said. "Practically the whole family tree is populated with redheads."

Carefully adding her long lashes and the freckles along her cheeks and the bridge of her nose, the sensation Adam had become familiar with settled over him.

Contentment.

Holding the sketch up, he looked it over and then glanced at Rose.

He was happy with it, but his opinion didn't matter.

Turning the page around, he presented it to her.

Rose gasped. "Oh my God."

Uncurling herself from the couch, she started to reach for it but stopped.

"Can I?"

Adam nodded, smiling as she took it with trembling hands.

"This is…" She stared down in quiet awe. "Adam, this is incredible. Is this…"

Her bright blue eyes found his.

"Is this how you see me?"

He tucked his pencil behind his ear. *"It's how you are. I just put it on paper."*

Rose's breath hitched and it took all his strength not to watch her chest rise and fall.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

Setting the sketchpad aside, Adam stood and crossed the distance between them.

Gently taking the drawing from her, he placed it on top of the others and threaded his fingers between hers. Kneeling in front of her, he tugged until she got the hint and moved to the very edge of the sofa, either leg framing his waist. He was just tall enough that even knelt, they were almost eye level with each other.

“I’m sorry I made you worry,” he signed.

Rose smiled, ducking to kiss him chastely. “You’re forgiven.”

Grinning, he pulled her bottom lip between his teeth, nipping lightly.

“I’m sorry I hurt your feelings,” she murmured against him.

He nodded, bumping the tip of his nose against hers. *“You’re forgiven.”*

Tentatively, his hands skimmed her bare legs and the heat in his belly doubled. Marveling at how soft her skin was, he blinked up at her, waiting for her cues to stop.

But Rose only clutched the front of his shirt and held him where he was.

“Adam…”

They didn’t have to go any further. Simply getting to touch her, kiss her, be near her was enough.

But that knowing part of his brain waited with trepidation for her to finish her sentence.

“I—I want to,” she whispered. “But I’m still…”

He nodded in understanding.

The giant question mark of his past was vexing for them both.

Tracing a lazy circle against her thigh, he leaned in to kiss her.

He didn’t ease up until she was moaning quietly into his mouth and tightening her legs against his sides.

Flashing a smile, he signed, *“Can I tell you a secret?”*

With a dazed look, Rose bobbed her head in agreement.

He kissed her once more. *“I had a dream about you,”* he signed. *“You moved my hands along your body, telling me how you liked being touched, showing me how to make you feel good.”*

She let out a half-gasp, half-whimper and rocked closer to him.

“I memorized every part of you,” he signed, watching color rise on her cheeks with pride. *“Memorized every single thing you loved, every movement that brought you pleasure, and I did them. Over and over and over.”*

Rose cursed under her breath. “Adam…”

Unable to stop himself, he angled to kiss her neck and along her bare collarbone and shoulder.

“When you let me, Rose,” he signed, pulling back just enough for her to see his hands. *“I’ll do just that. I’ll make my dream our reality.”*

Her fingers tightened at the back of his neck, and he grinned.

“When you let me, I’m going to show you just how good I’ll be to you, and how badly I’ve wanted you since the day we met.”

Squeezing her knees into his ribs, she shivered and breathed, “Fuck me.”

Adam arched an eyebrow, still smirking. *“Believe me, I want nothing more.”*

Her startled laugh ghosted beautifully over his skin and filled his ears with joy.

Pulling him closer, she kissed him fiercely.

“What if,” she started, toying with the hair at the nape of his neck. “We do some digging on Odette and we see if your fingerprints have any leads. And if nothing comes of either of them, then…” She chuckled. “Then I’ll stop being such a semipermanent cock-block.”

A deep rumbling in his chest vibrated between them.

“Okay,” he signed. *“I agree to your terms.”*

“Good,” she said, smiling. “So… You want to watch TV and make out some more?”

“Yes.” He cupped her face, kissing the bridge of her nose. *“Always yes.”*

Chapter Sixteen

East Cove had a holiday problem.

The winter holidays were one thing, and Rose was accepting of Easter, Fourth of July, and Memorial and Labor day. Halloween she loved, but Thanksgiving was only tolerated for the leftovers and a reason to eat pie for breakfast.

But the town practically thrived on special occasions and made up holidays no one outside of East Cove would ever care about.

One such day was Founder's Day.

Just seeing the banner being strung up between town hall and the credit union made Rose's eye twitch.

However, because her father still insisted on fulfilling even his most ridiculous mayoral duties, her family would be attending the Founder's Day boat parade and street fair.

But first, there was lunch.

Hoisting several paper grocery bags into one arm, Rose leaned back into the car to grab the handle of the six pack she'd also brought.

Warm hands on her waist tugged her gently back.

"I'm fine, I can get it," she said but still moved where Adam directed her.

Smirking, he shook his head and bent down to get the beer before taking half of the bags from her as well.

"I could've carried that," she said without any heat in her words.

Adam nodded and ducked to kiss her forehead. *"Sure,"* he mouthed and kicked the door closed.

Rolling her eyes, she chuckled as she followed him up the walkway to her parents' house.

Thankfully, the door was already unlocked.

“Hey guys,” she called from the entryway. “We brought snacks.”

Derek leaned around the corner from the kitchen. “What about—”

“And beer,” she said, jerking her chin at the six pack in Adam’s hand.

“Oooh, the good stuff,” he said, grinning.

Brushing past him, she went straight to the counter to set everything down.

“And if you drink all of it again like last year, I’m stealing your truck,” she warned.

Rapid, squeaking footsteps approached, and Rose turned just in time to see Zoey running out towards the back deck.

“Hi to you too,” she called.

Zoey waved. “Hi Adam,” she said, sticking her tongue out at her sister. “I’m finishing dad’s Founder’s Day hat if you want to help.”

“What is a Founder’s Day hat?”

Unpacking the first grocery bag, Rose said, “The most publicly embarrassing thing a man over fifty could ever wear.”

“That’s not true,” Derek said. “Remember his outfit for the Scottish Heritage Society fundraiser? Talk about breezy.”

She chucked the balled up receipt at him as he laughed.

“C’mon, I’ll show you,” Zoey said, gesturing for Adam to follow her.

Glancing at Rose, he smiled and headed for the deck.

It struck her in that instant just how comfortable Adam was with her family, how at ease he was with their whirling chaos and endless banter, and her heart crushed against her ribs.

He was making it too easy to imagine a lengthy future with him in it.

“Sooooo… How are things?” Derek drawled, reaching over for a beer.

Rose glared at him. “You’re not subtle.”

“I wasn’t going for subtle, I was going for laid back.” He attempted to twist off the cap and hissed when it didn’t budge. “Pop tops? Really?”

“Get over it.”

Fishing his keys out of his pocket, he said, “No really. Is everything… okay?”

It took four full seconds for her to realize he was asking about Pete, not Adam.

“Oh, uh, yeah. Everything’s fine,” she said, shoving the bags of tater tots in the freezer.

The cap flew off his beer with a *tiss* and a clatter.

“So you didn’t take him up on his offer?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Rose,” Derek sighed. “Come on.”

Turning, she fished out the tortilla chips and jars of salsa from the other paper bag.

“Don’t give me that tone,” she said. “If you were in my shoes, you’d have just as hard a time slamming the door on fifty grand, so don’t play all high and mighty.”

“I’m not, I’m just…” He took a swig from his beer. “I just still think it’s a bad idea to let Pete get close again. Even in a business sense.”

“Yes, Derek, I’m well aware of the dangers of accepting an investment from my cheating ex.” Rose waved a hand at the six pack. “Open one of those for me, will you?”

To her surprise, he didn’t tell her to do it herself and instead picked out a bottle and popped the cap.

“Just promise me you’ll take a couple more weeks to think about it,” he said.

She scoffed. “That’s a big ask, Der.”

“Please?” He held her beer out to her, nothing but sincerity in his eyes.

After a beat, she took the bottle and nodded. “Okay. Promise.”

The sliding back door opened, and their mother hurried to the fridge to pull out a tray of meat and veggie kebobs.

“Your dad wanted to take advantage of the nice weather, so we’re grilling today,” she said, shoving the refrigerator door closed with her hip. “And so help me, if you two make us late to the boat parade because you want to play ‘one more round’ of corn hole like last year, I’m leaving your share of inheritance to Zoey’s fish Hector.”

She fought a grin as she sipped her beer. “Hi mom, you look pretty today.”

“Don’t start with me, Rose,” she retorted, heading back out onto the deck.

Looking to her brother, she said, “So the parade day stress-fest is starting early this year, huh?”

“Oh yeah, she’s been on edge all morning.”

“You didn’t tell her about Pete, did you?”

Derek eyed her. “Sure, I also tossed a lit match into a dynamite factory.”

“Just checking.”

Wandering to the window, Rose spotted Zoey and Adam sitting at the table decorating her dad’s parade hat and smiled to herself.

As if sensing her watching him, Adam looked up and grinned.

“Come out here,” he signed. *“This is fun.”*

“Okay,” she signed back. *“Do you want something to drink?”*

“Anything but beer,” he signed, making a face.

Rose laughed. *“You got it.”*

Maybe this holiday wouldn’t be so bad after all.

* * * * * * *

With a half-eaten ear of grilled corn in his mouth, Adam followed the rest of the McClearys as they rushed to leave the house on time.

Rose chuckled. “You don’t have to bring it with you. There will be more food at the street fair.”

“I know,” he signed. *“But it’s really good.”*

“Thank you, Adam,” her mom said, grabbing a light jacket from the hall closet. “I’m glad someone appreciates my cooking.”

Rose and Zoey locked stares and rolled their eyes simultaneously.

“Dad, what boat are you on this year?” Zoey asked.

He shrugged, dropping the tacky captain’s hat decorated with plastic flowers and disco balls on top of his head. “I don’t remember. I think I’m with the 4-H Club this year.”

“That might be something you’ll want to find out before we get there,” Rose said, playfully flicking one of the bigger flower petals dangling from the hat’s brim.

Grinning, her dad reached up and clicked a hidden button on his hat. The whole thing lit up with blinking twinkle lights, making the disco balls flash and sparkle.

“Wherever I am, you won’t be able to miss me in this thing,” he said with a laugh.

Adam’s stare widened. *“So that’s what those were for.”*

“Okay, enough chattering,” her mom announced. “Everybody march.”

With Derek, her mom, and dad in the front, and Zoey in the middle, Rose and Adam trailed them closely, shutting the door behind them.

"Why does your dad have to wear that hat to begin with?" He asked, still chewing the corn cob.

"Everyone who participates in the boat parade dresses up in ridiculous outfits and big, over the top hats," she said, adjusting her purse strap. "Whoever dresses the most like a Party City going out of business sale wins a two hundred dollar gift card to Market Basket and free coffee from the Scuttlebutt for a year."

"Next year we should dress up," he signed. *"I bet we could win you coffee for a year."*

Rose laughed. "I don't know if I'd recover from the embarrassment."

"At least you wouldn't be the only one who looked ridiculous."

He nudged her elbow with his, smiling down at her.

The image of Adam in a funny costume and wildly decorated hat, waving to people as they sailed past flashed in her mind.

Next year.

He'd said *next year*.

Hope and fear swelled inside her in equal measure and Rose struggled to breathe through the flood of emotion.

"Sure," she managed. "We'll look silly together."

Grinning, Adam returned to eating as they walked down her parents' street.

The boat parade starting point was only half a mile from the house, and after dropping her dad off with the 4-H Club and all the other excited participants, her siblings took off in the direction of the fair.

“Keep an eye on your brother and sister,” her mom said. “I see Councilman Jones over there and I’ve been trying to get in touch with him for a few days.”

Rose did a slight double take. “You want me to keep an eye on Derek too?”

“As if your bother can be trusted around the spiked lemonade stand,” she said. “He’ll drink a gallon of it and wind up in a saltmarsh.”

As her mom walked off, Rose coughed out a laugh and turned back to Adam.

From the dock, he stared at the sailboats and yachts with interest, but didn’t look keen on getting too close.

“Ready to make sure my brother doesn’t get belligerently day drunk?”

Adam nodded and took her hand, already scanning the street for Zoey and Derek.

Threading their fingers together, she savored his warmth. Savored him.

Usually crowded town activities like this made Rose want to dive headfirst onto the rocks at low tide, but with Adam there she wasn’t quite so annoyed.

Everything was better because of him too.

Squeezing his hand twice, she didn’t have to wait longer than a second for him to look at her, eyebrow arched in question.

Popping onto her tiptoes, she kissed him gently and smiled.

“Thank you for being here,” she said.

Adam beamed and ducked down to kiss her again.

He released her only long enough to sign, *“I’ll go wherever you go.”*

Overwhelmed and desperate not to crack, Rose could only take his hand again and tug him along in search of her siblings.

Zoey was easy to find—her scarlet high ponytail twisting in the breeze coming off the water.

Derek, however, had managed to disappear in the throngs of people.

As they passed tents and tables selling pottery and stained glass, wood carvings, and yarn crafts, Rose kept an eye out for anything she thought Everly would like. Her best friend's birthday was a month away, but she liked planning ahead just in case.

Plus, she needed a mental activity to keep from focusing on all the people staring at them.

Well, at Adam.

As she forcibly pretended she didn't see two older women running a fundraising booth for the local Episcopalian church gaping slack-jawed at him, Rose examined a handmade wooden salad bowl at the next table.

"Young man, would you like a newsletter?" One of them asked eagerly. "Or a services schedule? We're running a raffle on a new flat screen TV. All the proceeds go to Saint Joseph's."

Bemused, Adam signed, *"I don't know what a raffle is, but it sounds nice. I hope Joseph likes it."*

When the ladies floundered, unsure of what to say, Rose took a step closer to his side.

"We didn't bring any cash, sorry," she said, flashing a tight smile. Taking his hand to pull him with her, she added, "Enjoy the boat parade."

Before he could ask her about the interaction, she chuckled to herself.

"Those ladies have been running the same raffle for the last five years," she said. "The rumor is nobody's won the television 'cause Father

Bob pawned it to pay for his Keno addiction."

Adam blinked. *"I think I'm more confused than I was before."*

Running up behind them, Zoey launched herself at Adam in a play attack that barely even rocked him on his feet.

"Gotcha!" She laughed, shoving a gaudy plastic flower into Adam's hair.

"Zo, come on," Rose muttered, rolling her eyes, but he only grinned and accepted the new accessory in stride.

Giggling, Zoey pushed between them. "What? It's Founder's Day."

"Okay, then where's mine?"

"As if you wouldn't murder me just for trying."

Wandering around other row of tables, Zoey pulled out her phone and snapped a bunch of photos—of them, of the crowd, of the harbor walk and ocean.

"Hey, have you seen Derek?" Rose called to her sister as she climbed up on the metal railing to get a better shot.

Without turning around, Zoey said, "I think he ran off to hide from one of his terrible dates."

"Who, Shelly?"

"No, the girl he went out with about a week ago. Krysta or Krystal? Something like that."

When Zoey climbed down, Adam looked at them both.

"Why does Derek go out with women he doesn't seem to like?"

Tucking her phone into her back pocket, Zoey said, "Because he has a crush on someone else, but he doesn't think he can be with her. Classic self-sabotaging behavior."

Rose frowned. "Who does Derek have a crush on?"

“Uhhh…” Avoiding her stare, Zoey turned. “I told Jennifer Dealey I’d meet her by the hot pretzel stand.”

She took off at a jog and Rose called after her, “Don’t go past Main Street or mom will kill us both.”

Her sister said something over her shoulder, but it was garbled by the noise from the crowd.

“Guess I’ll be interrogating Derek later,” she muttered. Tugging on the hem of Adam’s heather grey long sleeve tee, she added, “Come on, let’s go find a good spot to watch the boats. The parade’s starting soon.”

“What’s a crush?” He asked as they walked.

“It’s when someone likes another person romantically.”

“So I have a crush on you.”

Rose choked on a laugh. “Uh, yeah, I guess. Sort of. Except a crush is usually something secret. The other person doesn’t know.”

*“Oh. So I **had** a crush but now it’s something else.”*

“To be fair, your crush wasn’t all that secret,” she teased. “You’re not vague with your feelings.”

“I know,” he signed, grinning at her. *“But you like it when I’m direct.”*

Winking, he dropped a kiss to the top of her head and wrapped his arm around her waist, tucking her into his side.

It was a place Rose never wanted to leave.

Guiding them down the walkway a bit further, she found an opening along the harbor railing and squeezed them both in between two retired couples already sitting in folding camper chairs.

“There you are,” Derek called, weaving through several families with strollers. “I was looking all over for you.”

“Same here,” Rose said. “I thought you’d be neck deep in spiked lemonade by now.”

He sighed. “Get drunk on Founder’s Day one time and suddenly you’re the problem child.”

“Oh please, you were the problem child long before you got your hands on alcohol.”

Adam tapped his shoulder and pointed to the paper bag in Derek’s hand. *“What’s in there?”*

“Oh, uh…” Derek’s ears turned a bright shade of pink. “Just something I saw at one of the art booths.”

Rose stared at him with interest. “Show us. It’s not something gross, is it?”

“They don’t sell that kind of thing at the street fair.”

“Then let us see.”

She made a grab for the bag, but he yanked it back, dodging her entirely.

“Derek.”

“It’s none of your business.”

“You’re being weird,” she said. “We just want to see what art you got.”

He laughed dryly. “No, you just want to see the art I got so you can make fun of me.”

“Would it help to know that I’m just naturally curious?” Adam signed.

“It does help, Adam, thank you,” Derek said primly. Turning to Rose, he added, “You’re still not seeing it.”

Leaning in conspiratorially, Adam signed, *“Is it a gift for your crush?”*

Derek squinted at his hands. “Sorry, I missed one of those. Did you said smush?”

“Crush,” Rose corrected.

“Oh.” His head snapped up. “Oh! No, no, that’s not… I…” He cleared his throat. “Who, uh… who told you I have a crush on someone?”

“Zoey,” Rose and Adam replied simultaneously.

Derek groaned. “Of course.”

“So… Do you?”

Before he could either evade or attempt to answer, music began blasting from speakers along the harbor walk and cheers rippled through the crowd.

“Does that mean it’s starting?” Adam asked.

Rose nodded and urged him to stand closer.

The first boat was a large sailing ship with a crew all dressed in Hawaiian shirts and parrot shaped hats.

“Oh good, the Jimmy Buffet crowd got the first slot,” Derek mocked, making Rose laugh.

Each vessel was to make a loop around the harbor and then wind their way to the main dock where the winner would be announced. Her dad’s participation was purely for morale—he wasn’t allowed to win on principle alone.

The next yacht was decorated like a Mardi Gras float, and everyone aboard wore stacks of plastic bead necklaces and tacky shirts made to look like bare chests or women in bikinis.

“That doesn’t exactly seem family friendly,” Rose said under her breath.

Following was the 4-H Club sailing boat, and Derek and Rose started heckling their dad, yelling out and whistling loudly.

He was right though—he couldn’t be missed in a light up hat.

“He looks like he’s having fun,” Adam signed.

“Dad loves this stuff,” she said. “I think public appearances are why he became Mayor in the first place.”

Waving to him, Adam pantomimed his hat and then gave two big thumbs up, beaming from ear to ear.

“Thanks for the help,” her dad yelled over the noise.

Behind the 4-H boat, a yacht crowded with people trailed along, music pumping from speakers on board.

It looked like several families were all on the deck, dressed in various animal costumes.

As they made their way by, Rose spotted an adorable little boy dressed like a hedgehog saying hello to the crowd and she waved back.

“Okay, that’s pretty cute,” she admitted, still smiling at the children jumping around on the boat.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Adam watching her and she glanced up.

“What?”

A soft smile curved his lips, but he shook his head. *“Nothing.”*

“Isn’t Grampy captaining one of these?” Derek asked before she could press Adam for a real answer.

She scanned the row of vessels. “Yeah, I think so. Maybe he’s at the back.”

A splash to her right was instantly followed by a horrified scream, and Rose whirled.

More commotion, more noise, but none of it yielded information until—

“Man overboard!” Someone shouted.

Derek craned his neck. “Oh shit.”

A woman’s scream pierced the air. “Help! Help!”

Rose pitched forward, trying to see who had fallen.

Through the rising panic, she caught one word that chilled her.

Child.

A child had fallen into the water.

“Oh my God,” she gasped. “It’s a kid.”

In the deep blue and white foaming wakes bobbed a splotch of brown.

The little boy dressed as a hedgehog.

He struggled against the current and choppy waves, but his soaked through costume turned leaden, dragging him down.

Without warning, Adam shoved off from the rail and took off running towards the nearest dock.

She tried to grab him, but her fingers barely grazed his arm.

“Adam, wait,” she yelled, sprinting after him.

His long legs and determination took him far and fast, and the crowd around them became a constant obstacle for her to push against.

“Adam!”

He didn’t slow down.

Finally, Rose broke free and bolted for the dock he was already on.

In a heart wrenching blur, he vaulted over the side and dove into the water, disappearing fully under the surface.

“*No*,” Rose screamed.

Adam was gone. The only evidence of him were the rapidly fading ripples where he’d jumped into the ocean.

Tearing her purse off her shoulder, she tossed it onto the wooden dock. She only managed to get one shoe off before someone grabbed her

arm, stopping her.

She whipped around, already fighting whoever had decided to interfere.

Derek deflected her blow. “That water is still too cold,” he told her, as if that was supposed to stop her from jumping in. “You’ll freeze.”

“But Adam—”

“I know,” he said, still holding her tightly. “But you can’t go after him.”

“Like hell I can’t,” she shouted, struggling against him.

“*Rose*.”

Twisting, she yelled, “Let me go. I won’t lose him.”

Alarmed voices from behind them caught their attention and several older men were running down to the dock holding floatation vests and white and red lifebuoys.

“EMTs are coming,” one called. “But we lost visual.”

The bottom fell out of her world in a millisecond.

Lost visual.

No one knew where they were.

Images of Adam washed up on the rocks, half drowned and unconscious, flashed in her mind and the air stalled in her lungs.

“He’ll be okay,” Derek assured her. “Adam’s strong. He’s already survived something like this once.”

That wasn’t the comfort he thought it would be.

Rose still strained against his hold, but Derek’s arms locked down tight.

Her eyes scanned the terrified crowd along the walkway railing, searching for the rescue team or someone else with news that Adam and the little boy had emerged.

In the pulsing mass of people, one face stuck out.

Shoulder to shoulder with other townspeople, Odette stared down at them, with an unreadable expression.

Rose's fear morphed into rage.

"You…" She hissed, just low enough that Derek didn't hear her.

But it seemed Odette did.

Bright aquamarine eyes locked on hers, and something akin to anxiety flickered in her gaze.

Rose wanted to throttle the woman.

For a second time her brother was in peril, and yet again, Odette did nothing but stand back and watch.

Fuck their familial bond, real or imaginary. She'd never have access to Adam again.

Shocked, urgent sounds flooded her ears and Rose turned to see the older fishermen readying one of the lifebuoys.

"We've got you, buddy," the oldest man in Carhart called down. "Hang on."

Following their gaze, Rose saw two figures approaching the dock.

Adam, with the little boy in his arms, holding him up so his face was above the water.

Relief turned her knees spongy and that time she was thankful for Derek's strong grip on her.

Even against the waves, Adam swam quickly and with sure, even strokes, getting them yards closer every few seconds.

One of the men tossed out a white and red ring, and Adam swam to it, putting the boy in the loop and waving for them to pull the child to safety.

"Hang on and we'll bring you in," a man shouted.

Adam didn’t.

He gestured again, signaling to take the boy in first.

They didn’t argue.

Bobbing on the waves, the lifebuoy kept the child secure as they reeled the rope in just as EMTs ran down the length of the dock with their gear.

The group of men hauled the little boy out of the water with as much care as they could, and when he made it onto dry land, everyone around them cheered.

But Adam was still swimming.

Wrenching free of Derek, Rose rushed to the edge of the dock and got down on her stomach, reaching out for him.

With a final push of energy, Adam closed the distance. Wet fingertips grazed hers, scrabbling for purchase.

The second her palm was crushed against his, she could have wept.

“I’ve got you,” she said, using all her strength to lift. “I’ve got you, Adam, I promise.”

All around her, more hands, more arms, more encouraging voices appeared. Derek and two other fishermen helped pull him up and out of the rough waves breaking against the dock.

Hoisting his torso onto the wooden planks, Adam leveraged his weight while the others yanked him free from the water.

Rose could have sworn the ocean swelled under him, either helping to buoy or chasing him as he was dragged onto dry land.

A second round of cheers erupted behind them, but she barely heard it.

All she could hear was Adam’s ragged breathing as she clung to his frigid, soaked chest.

“You’re okay.” She cupped his face, staring into his bright, violet eyes. “You’re safe.”

She realized she wasn’t telling him, she was telling herself.

Smiling weakly, Adam nodded against her palms. Sitting up, he hugged her with more strength than she thought he’d possess after exerting so much energy.

A few feet away, they heard urgent voices from the men surrounding the boy.

Adam twisted, attempting to sign to one of the EMTs.

“He’s in good hands,” she told him.

Moments later they heard one of them say, “He’s breathing.”

Adam sagged on his elbow, eyes sliding shut.

“You did it,” she said, kissing his temple. “You saved him.”

Another paramedic came over, greeting Adam with a friendly tone.

“I’m going to check your vitals and we’re going to get you warmed up, okay?”

Rose explained Adam used ASL and she needed to stay to translate, and the medic smiled.

“No problem at all. I’ve always wanted to learn, so maybe you can teach me some.”

While he got to work monitoring Adam’s heartrate and lungs, Rose’s stare lifted to the crowd again.

And the added figure pressed against the railing.

There, standing next to Odette in a bright white flowing dress and matching shawl, was an older woman whose face Rose would recognize anywhere.

Because she looked just like Adam.

Chapter Seventeen

Rolling his head against his pillow, Adam blinked awake.

Scarlet waves cast in golden morning light met his eyeline and surprise quickly faded into contented joy.

Rose.

Rose was in his bed.

After the paramedic had deemed him healthy, she'd asked a dozen questions or more about whether or not something could happen to him later. Something about delayed cardiac episodes, body aches, and the likelihood of getting sick after such an event.

Adam had told her he felt fine—wasn't even that cold if he was honest—but she didn't stop fretting.

The rest of the day was a blur—lots of questions where his answers were translated by Rose, crowds of people staring, police and the harbormaster discussing the accident, Rose's dad simultaneously directing people and calming their panic.

For some reason, Rose hadn't wanted anyone unnecessary near him, and once he'd been cleared, she got Derek to drive them both back to the Whittaker.

Adam had been a little disappointed. He'd been hoping to try one of those hot pretzels Zoey had raved about.

He'd showered and changed into sweatpants and a tee shirt and when he'd emerged from the bathroom, Rose was there with a heaping tray of food, a giant mug of hot chocolate, and the urgent promise not to leave his side for the rest of the night.

Apparently she had kept that promise.

Stretching a little, he was careful not to jostle the bed.

The television was still on across the room, and she hadn't changed out of her clothes from the day before, and Adam was certain this was already the best morning of his life.

Then he remembered he was allowed to kiss her now, and his delight doubled.

Inching closer, he carefully linked his hand with hers, and waited for Rose to rouse just enough to turn towards him before kissing her forehead.

She didn't open her eyes.

Adam dropped a kiss on the curve of her eyebrow. Still nothing.

Smiling, he kissed her cheek, the tip of her nose, and jaw all before she finally hummed sleepily and shifted under the light blanket she'd pulled over herself while they'd watched TV.

"Hmm?" Her lashes fluttered against her skin. "What time is it?"

He didn't answer—mostly because he had no idea.

Instead, he ducked and slanted his lips over hers tenderly.

Rose tensed for only a moment before easing against him, the corner of her mouth twitching upwards.

"Good morning," she said, glancing up at him. "I take it you slept okay."

Adam nodded, smiling and brushing a strand of hair out of her face before kissing her again.

As if remembering why she was snuggled up next to him to begin with, Rose jolted.

"Are you feeling alright? Does anything hurt? Are you feeling sick?"

Her hands searched his torso, his arms, his face, reaffirming that he was whole and uninjured.

Looping his arm around her waist, he shook his head and smirked, pulling her flush against his chest.

She worried too much about him.

She chuckled softly. “Are you always this affectionate first thing in the morning?”

Adam tipped his chin to look down at her and shrugged as best as he could while laying down. He let his gaze trail over her appreciatively and winked, hoping she understood.

Color rushed Rose’s cheeks. She understood just fine.

“You’re ridiculous,” she said, still smiling.

But that didn’t stop her from nuzzling into the dip of his throat and sighing happily.

It was his new favorite sound.

Adam wondered if he could convince Rose to stay just like this for the rest of the day.

Knowing her, absolutely not, but it was nice to dream.

As the silence stretched, he let his eyes slip shut, the dark haze of sleep creeping back over him. Just as he was starting to doze, he felt her press her ear to his chest.

His heart.

“You scared me,” she whispered, breath ghosting over his warm skin. “When I saw you dive into the water yesterday… I thought you’d never come back out.”

Adam’s lungs seized, ribs squeezing his insides too tight.

“You saved a child’s life, so I can’t be angry,” she continued, smirk audible. “But I don’t know if I can handle going through that again. At least not for a long, long time.”

Tightening his arms around her, he nodded against the top of her head.

“I think I’m going to have a hard time letting you out of my sight today,” she said, curling her fingers into his shirt. “I’m not usually the clingy type, but…”

He grinned to himself. It was hard to imagine Rose glomming onto anyone, but if she wanted to be that way with him, he would happily endure a second shadow.

She was finally letting him witness her vulnerabilities, her softness. He wanted to reward that however he could.

Unwinding his arms from her, he put his hands into the minimal space between them.

“Nothing will ever take me away from you,” he signed.

Rose opened her mouth to speak, but he gently held two fingers to her lips.

“Nothing,” he signed again. *“And even if I’m not physically with you, you have something much more important.”*

“What?”

“My love, Rose.” He held her stare. *“You have my love.”*

He felt more than heard her soft gasp.

“You don’t have to repeat it back to me,” he added with a lopsided grin. *“I know it’ll feel like too much. But I do—I love you. And I know deep down there’s nothing that could take that love away. If my heart belonged to someone else, I’d miss them. I’d feel their absence in my soul. But I don’t.”*

Rose’s eyes shown as she watched his hands and then his face.

Taking her hand, he placed it over his heart.

“I only feel you.”

Releasing a shuddering breath, she tipped her head back a fraction and he took the opportunity to lean down, brushing his lips over her cheek.

"I only feel you too," she whispered. "I only ever want to feel you."

Adam was suddenly way too hot. His insides were boiling, his limbs aching with a fever he couldn't break.

His mind fogged over as he pulled Rose close by the back of her neck, kissing her until he was certain he'd slipped some of his internal fire deep into her core.

Arching into him, she hooked one leg over his hip, and if he had a voice, he'd have groaned low and filthy into her mouth.

Tangling his fingers in her silken hair, he angled her back so he could drag his lips down the column of her throat. Her pulse thundered against his touch, urging him on.

Scrabbling along his abdomen, Rose yanked at the hem of his shirt. "Take—fuck, take this off."

Adam grinned down at her. *"You're the one still under a blanket."*

"Barely," she muttered, but she still pulled the light quilt off her and tossed it to the floor.

As she moved, he rolled with her, propping himself up on his forearm and burying his face in her neck.

Returning to her previous task, Rose shoved at his tee shirt.

The second her hands grazed his skin, all rational thought left Adam. He needed to feel her soft, sure fingers digging into every muscle in his body. Needed to feel her nails raking down his back.

Pushing up onto his knees, he yanked his shirt over his head and dropped it off the side of the bed.

"Holy shit," she blurted out and on reflex, he looked down at himself.

“What?”

“I forgot how jacked you are,” she said, skimming her palm over the ridges of his stomach. “Have you been working out without me knowing?”

Smirking, he finger combed his hair back off his forehead and shook his head.

“Then you won the genetic lottery, babe.”

Adam’s gaze heated. She’d never called him that before.

It was such a simple word, but it sparked something powerful in his chest.

Staring down at her, he drank in the sight of her full curves and long legs still covered in denim and rumpled cotton.

He wanted to tear each item of clothing off her at the seams.

“Your turn,” he signed.

Dragging his hand up her waist, he dipped under the material until his fingertips brushed the structured edge of her bra.

Sitting up, Rose mirrored his action, whipping her shirt off, bright red waves tumbling down over her shoulders and back.

Adam *ached* from the sight of her.

He must have been staring because a flush colored her cheeks and blotted down the fair, freckled expanse of her chest.

“I, uh… I wasn’t really prepared for…” She balled her shirt up in her hands. “I would’ve worn something nicer if—”

He cut her off by lunging for her, kissing her ferociously.

“I don’t know what you mean by nicer,” he signed, sloppy and fast. *“But this—”* He plucked at the black strap curving over her shoulder. *“Is doing something to me.”*

She laughed, glancing down at her half-naked torso. “I’m glad you like it.”

Like? No.

He adored.

Every new inch of her he got to see added fuel to his ever-present inferno.

How was he supposed to function now that he'd seen this much of her?

How was he supposed to function when he got to see *even more*?

Adam's gaze traveled up her stomach, catching on all the moles and freckles he found. His favorite so far was the one just barely hidden by the cup of her bra and the runner up was the mole an inch to the left of her navel.

He wanted to find them all. Taste them all. Draw them all too.

He was going to sketch this very moment and he'd get every detail correct.

"You're looking at me like you want to eat me," she said, voice suddenly husky.

The primal part of his brain roared as his chest heaved.

"I suppose that's because I do," he signed.

Rose's blue eyes darkened, and he was hypnotized by the need in her stare.

Swallowing roughly, his hands flexed several times.

"Teach me," he signed, gaze flicking down to the swell of her breasts. *"How do you like to be touched?"*

Rose's breath hitched. "I…"

Whatever she was about to say died on her tongue as he cupped her gently, rubbing his thumb over hardening flesh beneath the fabric.

"Like this?" He watched every single micro expression flitting across her face, committing her pleasure to memory.

“H-harder,” she stammered, clutching his hand to her. “I won’t break.”

He followed her directions and was rewarded with her sudden gasp.

“Yes,” she nearly hissed. “More—more like that.”

Grinning, he did as she demanded, pinching and tugging until she arched her back and moaned.

Adam changed his mind. *That* was his favorite sound.

“Hold on,” she said, sitting up once more and reaching behind her.

A delicate click preceded her bra falling away from her and suddenly Adam couldn’t breathe correctly.

“There,” she said with a knowing smile. “That should make this a bit easier.”

Easier? He was about to pass out from her beauty.

Leaning down over her, he glanced up through his lashes at her before dropping his lips to the freckle he could now see perfectly.

Kissing all over her exposed skin, he marveled at her softness. The tip of his tongue traced along the faint, thin stretch marks that curved over the sides of her breasts. Pale white met petal pink and deeper rouge at the tips, and his mouth watered.

Sucking her between his lips, he drew her in deeper as she gasped his name.

Rose sank her fingers into his hair, clutching him to her as if he’d fade like mist from her hands.

Nothing could drag him from her. Nothing at all would ever trump his need for her.

Light, polite knocking at his door cut through the air like the world’s loudest bell.

They both froze.

The only person who ever knocked on his door was currently under him, so who the hell was out there?

And how fast could he convince them to leave?

Glancing up at Rose, they silently debated.

Maybe if they didn't respond, the person on the other side would assume no one was in the room.

His grip on her waist tightened as they held their breath.

The knocking returned.

"Adam?" Lex's voice called quietly. "I'm so sorry to bother you but someone's here to see you…"

He arched an eyebrow at Rose.

"Do you think it's about the little boy I helped?"

She shrugged and it took all his willpower not to stare at her naked chest as she moved.

"Maybe?" She whispered. "Or it's the police wanting to ask more questions?"

He glanced over his shoulder at the door.

Rose gripped his forearm. "We could just make them come back later."

He was just about to agree when Lex knocked again.

"They said it's urgent," they said, audibly uncomfortable.

Guilt twisted in Adam's stomach. He couldn't just leave Lex out there without an answer or some assistance.

"Fuck," Rose hissed, already grabbing for her bra and shirt.

Turns out there *was* something that could drag him away from her in this moment.

Empathy.

Before Rose could fully redress, he wrapped his arm around her and hauled her in for a brutal, scorching kiss that stole their air from both their lungs.

"We're finishing this tonight," he signed. *"And I won't be done with you until you're utterly spent."*

Blushing deeply, Rose blinked up at him. "I've never seen you be bossy," she murmured. "I like it."

Raking his gaze over her, Adam flashed a wolfish grin.

"Stop eye-fucking me and put your shirt back on," she said, redoing her bra.

Putting himself back together—and adjusting the waistband of his pants to hopefully conceal what was *very painfully* obvious—he ducked into the bathroom to quickly splash cold water on his face.

When Rose was covered, he opened the door and greeted Lex.

"Hi, sorry," he signed. *"I overslept I guess. I'll be out in just a minute."*

Relief washed over their face. "Oh thank God," they said. "I'll just…" They tilted their head to look past his shoulder. "Rose?"

Tossing her hair out of her face, she smiled tightly. "Morning. We fell asleep watching TV last night. Be out in just a moment."

"Sure, yeah, um…" Lex nodded. "Take your time."

Forty-five seconds and three extra kisses later, they both were out in the hall and making their way quickly to the front desk.

Two women turned around and Adam felt the color drain from his face.

Odette and a woman who shared almost all of his own features stared at him in eerie silence for three beats.

Finally, the older woman dressed in all white stepped forward.

“Dexhart.” Her voice was cool and low. “What have you done?”

* * * * * * *

The pendulum had never swung between painfully turned on and emotionally devastated so fast for Rose in her life.

The severe, icy woman standing in her inn was Adam’s mother.

She wasn’t as surprised as she expected. They shared the same angular features and straight nose. Even their hair was the same shade of inky, jet black.

Her eyes were different though—closer to Odette’s aquamarine blue—and Rose couldn’t help but feel relieved that at least that part of Adam was still solely his.

Unease spread through the lobby like a thick fog.

Adam only stared at her, lips parted slightly.

“Hello there,” Rose started, forcing herself to speak with her tried and true hospitality voice. “I don’t believe we caught your name.”

“That’s because I didn’t give it to you,” the woman said coldly, sliding her unapproving gaze to Rose.

Odette leaned towards her. “Mother, this is the woman who *saved* Dex,” she said with emphasis. “It’s my understanding he would not be alive if it wasn’t for her.”

Rose had never told Odette any of that, but it wouldn’t be hard to find out the details of Adam’s accident through the East Cove gossip mill.

After a lengthy moment of assessment, the older woman took a deep breath.

“My name is Mira,” she said finally. “You have my gratitude for caring for my son.”

Rose nodded once but the unease didn’t dissipate.

The other shoe was about to drop. She could feel it like a wild animal aware of a bad storm.

"Dexhart," Mira said, looking to him. "I believe I'm owed an explanation."

Adam furrowed his brow, lifting his hands to sign just as Odette stepped forward.

"I told you," she said. "His memories—"

"I will judge his mind, not you," Mira snapped.

Rose's gut twisted. This woman made even the coldest WASP mother seem like a sunny sitcom mom.

"I don't know what explanation you want," Adam signed. *"I don't remember anything from before my accident."*

Mira's sharp gaze dropped to his hands, and she scowled. "What language is this?"

"ASL," Rose told her, fighting the sneer tugging at her lips. "Didn't you use it before to communicate with your *son*?"

"We don't speak English in our home," Mira said. "And the signs we use look nothing like your ASL."

So Adam was bilingual. His mother and sister didn't have any discernable accent, but their syntax and grammar felt old fashioned, so it could stand to reason they knew multiple languages.

"Show me," Adam signed.

Mira and Odette only stared.

After an awkward beat, Rose translated.

Taking the initiative, Odette signed to Adam using a variation Rose had never seen before. Her movements were fluid and graceful, taking up much more space in front of her torso than ASL usually did. And each

motion was slower, as if the subtleties of each were necessary for understanding.

Adam watched her with fascination.

"That's beautiful," he signed. *"I'd love to learn it."*

When Rose translated, Mira clicked her tongue.

"You already have," she said, annoyance clipping her words. "You know this language, Dexhart. You know how to communicate with us."

"Maybe I did, but I don't anymore," he signed, clearly fighting his own frustration.

"Absurd."

"What part of 'head trauma' do you not understand?" He snapped.

Rose braced herself to translate that one.

Eyes flaring, Mira strode forward, posture perfectly straight as she approached her son.

She lifted her hand and Rose twitched closer, expecting her to strike him.

Instead, she simply hovered her palm an inch above Adam's temple, fingers curved slightly as if wishing to stroke his forehead.

The anger and disdain in her gaze faded, replaced by shock and heartbreak.

"Dexhart," she whispered, staring up at him. "What happened to you?"

Adam froze in place, uncertainty clouding his expression.

He looked lost again, like those first few days after his accident.

"That's something we've been trying to figure out," Rose said, watching her intently.

Mira didn't respond. As she pressed her hand closer, but still didn't touch him, her stare became distant and unfocused, and then her eyelids

drooped halfway.

A moment later, she took a shallow breath and blinked.

Mira's lip curled. "Isla."

"Who?" Rose asked over Odette's muttered curse.

Locking eyes with Adam, Mira said, "Was our argument really that terrible? You went to *her* to wipe it all away?"

"I'm sorry, you think Adam did this to himself?" Rose glared at her.

Mira's bright blue stare flicked to her. "Stop. Talking."

Even as offended as she was, Rose did as the woman ordered. She kept her mouth shut, despite the litany of curses running through her head.

It was as if she didn't even *want* to use her voice in front of her.

"You can't speak to her that way," Adam signed, glowering down at his mother. *"If you care about me, you will be kind to the woman I love."*

Mira squinted at his hands as Odette stepped closer.

"Mother, she's his translator," she said. "If she cannot speak, we cannot understand him. Please…"

Sighing, Mira glanced at Rose. "Fine. Speak then."

The sensation of having a thread snipped rocked inside Rose's mind and she shook her head.

Gathering her wits, she said, "I don't appreciate being ordered around in my own inn by complete strangers who couldn't even bother to look for their missing family member."

"You know nothing about me," Mira ground out. "Or what I did to search for my son."

"I guess watching the news or doing a Google search was too much to ask, right?" She snarked back.

Polite hospitality Rose had left the conversation.

Bitter, sarcastic New Englander Rose was now off her leash.

Mira opened her mouth, but Adam cut her off.

"Stop this," he told her. *"Rose is protective of me because she knows what I've gone through. She's been with me every step of the way and she's never left my side. Which is more than I can say for you right now. So you will be courteous in this conversation if you wish to continue."*

Translating, she kept the satisfaction out of her tone.

Mostly.

Mira's stare was murderous, but she simply tucked her chin once in agreement.

"Dex, we need to make arrangements," Odette said cautiously. "We need to find out if Isla's…" She glanced at Rose before saying, "Actions are reversable."

Rose snorted. "You think you can wish and pray his memories back into his head? His doctors have already said he may never get them back, so why—"

"Your doctors don't have what we do," Mira said. "Which is why my son will be returning with us."

It was as if Mira had shoved a red hot iron into Adam's chest.

He backed up several steps, jerking his head back and forth in a panic.

"I'm not going anywhere with you," he signed. *"I don't know you."*

"I'm your mother, Dexhart—"

"Stop calling me that." Adam slashed his hand through the air. *"I don't know who Dexhart is. I am Adam. I came out of the ocean as* ***Adam****. And I choose the life that keeps me here with the people I care about."*

Sorrow bled into Mira's stare as Rose translated.

"Without your memories, you do not know the fate you're sentencing yourself to."

“Then tell me,” he snapped. *“Tell me what it is that you and Odette are keeping from me. Tell me this supposedly terrifying fact that will change my mind. Stop keeping me in the dark.”*

Rose remembered his severe reaction to her keeping information about Pete from him, and something clicked into place.

He may not want the life his past as Dexhart provided, but not knowing anything about who he was or what happened was eating him up inside.

It was a slow, painful torture he was fighting daily to ignore.

Odette and Mira shared a weighted look but said nothing.

Gently laying a hand on Adam’s shoulder, Rose murmured, “If we could find this Isla, and get her to help us… Is that something you’d want?”

His chest heaved a bit as he tried to calm down and think.

Tilting his head towards her, he bobbed his head. *“Maybe. I… I would at least want to talk to her.”*

“Okay,” she said, offering a smile. Turning to his mother, she added, “Is that possible? To talk to Isla?”

Mira considered it for a long beat. “I suppose. But it may take time to find her.”

“Fine,” Rose said, forcing her tone to stay even. “So until you get in touch with her, and until we have a chance to sit down with her, Adam will stay here where he’s comfortable.”

It wasn’t a suggestion. It was an order.

And from the look on Mira’s face, it grated her to no end.

Reaching down, Adam took Rose’s hand and squeezed a silent thank you.

Odette’s gaze dropped to their entwined fingers, and if she wasn’t mistaken, Rose could have sworn his sister looked… pleased.

“I will see what I can do,” Mira said. Adjusting her shawl, she added, “You may be Adam in this place, but with us—your people—you will always be Dexhart. Running will never change that.”

Before either of them could respond, she turned and strode out the door, a sudden cold wind blowing through the lobby as she left.

“Take care,” Odette said. “We’ll talk again soon.”

Following her mother, at least she closed the door behind her.

And like a rapidly deflating balloon, all the tension and anger and frustration escaped from the room through every crack and crevasse.

Rose’s shoulders slumped. “Jesus Christ.”

“That was wild,” Lex said behind them and both Adam and Rose jumped.

“Oh my God, I forgot you were there,” she exclaimed.

Lex winced. “Sorry. It just felt kind of wrong to clock out during all… of that.”

“Yeah, that’s fair.” Glancing around, Rose sighed, “Okay, I need coffee.”

Taking Adam’s hand once again, she waited for him to look at her.

“C’mon.” She offered a smile. “I’ll make your hot chocolate extra sweet this time.”

His lips curved, but the haunted, undulating shadow in his eyes didn’t fade.

And neither did the knot in her stomach.

Chapter Eighteen

That afternoon the strongest storm Rose had ever witnessed ripped through East Cove.

Unprecedented wind, rain, hail, and waves high enough to threaten structures and roadways battered the town and surrounding coastline.

All available bodies were called to the Whittaker to help set up sandbags and rapidly weatherproof the aging inn.

Rose was already in knots thinking of the insurance claim costs if her roof didn't hold.

With Derek in the cellar pumping water out and keeping an eye on the finicky boiler, Adam continued hoisting sandbag out of the truck, building a barrier for the rising flood, while Rose dragged the few pieces of patio and lawn furniture into her tiny cottage. She'd only have to store them until the storm passed, and given how things were going, she didn't think she'd be going to her cottage much.

She wasn't a big fan of getting pelted by hailstones.

The weather report on the lobby television continued to report on the severity of weather conditions, and how suddenly the storm had appeared on the Doppler radar.

Rose's grandfather called her to check in, calling it 'witch weather' and joking that 'some ocean deity must be real angry.'

She ignored the way her stomach sank at his words.

As rain battered the windows, Everly appeared from the kitchen, wrapping herself in her coat and scarf.

Rose frowned. "Where are you going?"

"My neighbor just called and said he thinks a tree branch just smashed my living room windows in," she said, yanking a knit hat over her

curls. “I’m just going to go check. I might have to put tarps and plywood up, but I’ll be back.”

“No, no, we’ll be fine, take care of your place first,” Rose said. “I just worry about you driving in this.”

Everly flashed a tight smile. “I’ll be okay, I promise. I’ll call you with an update.”

Hugging her quickly, Rose watched as she hurried out the employee exit, wind howling through the open door.

“Christ on a cracker,” Everly shouted to no one, fighting to slam the door shut behind her.

It felt like endless, exhausting work. Taping windows, reassuring guests, mopping up mud and rain from the lobby entrance, keeping the basement from flooding, and fielding calls from their other employees telling her they couldn’t get out of their neighborhood due to fallen trees or downed powerlines.

When she put out one fire, three more popped up.

And still the storm raged on.

Occasionally, Rose would swear the wind sounded like a woman’s furious scream, and the rain like pounding fists.

Trudging out of the cellar, Derek wiped his hands on a rag. “Okay, I’ve managed to get that boiler to stabilize,” he said. “And I think Adam managed to sandbag the right spot to keep more water from coming in, so you should be good there too.”

“Thank you,” she sighed, handing him a fresh hand towel to clean up with.

His hair was still wet and smudges of black and brown were all over his face and neck. He looked like he needed a shower and a stiff drink.

“I’m going to go check the fridge’s connection in case you lose power, and the generator kicks on,” he said, scrubbing his jaw. “Everly’s going to hate me poking around in there while she’s cooking but…”

“Everly’s not here,” Rose said.

Derek stalled, eyes widening. “What do you mean?”

“Her neighbor called. Something about a tree branch breaking a window,” she explained. “She went home to do damage control.”

“She’s driving in this storm?”

“She’s lived here her whole life, Derek,” Rose said. “She knows how to drive in bad weather.”

“But half the roads are washed out, and trees are down all over,” he argued, voice laced with panic. “I mean, hell, I had a hard time getting here and I have four wheel drive. She’s just in her hatchback.”

Rose eyed him strangely. “I was worried too, but she’s only fifteen minutes away.”

“And in this it’ll be forty-five.” He jabbed a finger towards the nearest window and the sheets of rain coming down.

“Derek—”

“If her window’s broken, she’ll need to put up plywood and do some weatherproofing,” he continued, wringing the towel in his hands. “Does she have what she needs for a job like that?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “But I’m sure she can make do.”

His blue eyes flashed. “Make do? That’s not good enough.”

“Derek, what is your problem?” Rose circled the desk. “Everly is perfectly capable of handling this.”

“I know that,” he shot back. “But—”

Clenching his jaw shut, Derek glared at the floor.

“I’m going to check the fridge,” he said finally. “Let me know if you hear from her.”

Stalking off, his boots practically thundered on the hardwood and Rose could only stare, totally baffled by her brother.

Before she could go after him to interrogate him, the Whittaker phone rang.

“Little fires everywhere,” she muttered and picked up.

* * * * * * *

By nightfall, Rose’s nerves were shot.

Guests were grumpy about the bad turn of weather, the inn was understaffed, internet service failed, and Everly wasn’t answering her calls or texts.

And just when she thought things couldn’t get worse, the power went out.

“Motherfucker,” she ground out.

The generator would kick on any second, but it was limited to only essentials—a few hardwired lights, the heating, and the refrigerator in the kitchen.

Thankfully, she’d already pulled out the emergency kits. One for each room and three for her, Lex, and Everly.

It wasn’t much but it would help everyone feel a bit better to have a flashlight, some extra snacks, and toiletries.

Turning her flashlight on, she set it on the desk to let the beam illuminate the lobby with cold white light.

A tap on her shoulder brought her head around.

“Can you see me well enough for me to sign?” Adam asked.

Rose nodded. “I can see you just fine.”

He smiled. *“Great. Where are the bandages?”*

She jolted, reaching for him. “Are you hurt? What happened?”

Lifting a hand to the side of his head, he pressed gingerly to a spot hidden by his damp hair. When he withdrew his fingers, they were blotched with a dark stain.

“Adam, you’re bleeding,” Rose gasped. “Oh my God.”

He shrugged. *“I didn’t think it was that bad, but I do feel kind of dizzy.”*

Guiding him to the nearest stool, she forced him to sit and pulled out the first aid box.

“What happened?” She asked again.

“I went out to make sure I’d put down enough sandbags and a broken branch fell on my head,” he signed, wincing as she parted his hair. *“I didn’t black out though, which is good, right?”*

“I’d say so, given your history,” she teased gently.

Grabbing another flashlight, she clicked it on, angling it so she could see his wound better.

Adam pinched his eyes shut, momentarily blinded by the beam.

“Sorry,” she said, rubbing his arm. Examining him, she added, “I don’t think you’ll need stitches but I’m still going to patch it up.”

Nodding, he settled onto the wooden seat more and waited for her to pick out the correct supplies.

Opening an alcohol wipe, she warned him before pressing it to his scalp. Adam flinched but didn’t pull away.

“Worst part is over,” she said, tossing the bloody material into the trash.

He thanked her with a soft smile.

Placing a butterfly closure over the first side of his cut, Rose glanced down at his face.

“Are you doing okay?”

“This part doesn’t hurt,” he signed.

“I meant… about your mom,” she murmured.

Adam pressed his lips into a flat line.

After a moment, he finally answered.

“I don’t know,” he signed. *“She… She wasn’t who I was expecting.”*

Rose snorted. “Me either.”

“Do you…” His throat worked as he swallowed. *“Do you think my family is lying to me?”*

“About what?”

He dropped his gaze. *“About what I am?”*

What.

Not who.

Rose should have scoffed, told him he’d been hit on the head a bit harder than he realized. But she had to admit, the strangeness was stacking up.

“Adam, do you think…” She chewed her lip. “Are you saying you think you might be a mer—”

The front door to the inn flung open, wind and rain rushing in along with a bundled up figure.

“Everly?” Rose called.

Squinting, she realized the person was taller than Everly.

And male.

“It’s me.”

The voice made her stomach twist.

“Pete?” She grabbed her flashlight and angled it over to shine on him. “What the hell are you doing here?”

He fought to shut the door and bolt it before wiping his boots on the mat.

“That storm is one for the record books,” he said, pushing his jacket hood off his head. “I’ve never seen the waves get this high.”

Planting a hand on her hip, she repeated, “What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to check on you,” he said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “And on the inn. I know some of the weatherproofing is a bit iffy.”

“We’re fine,” she said tersely. “You didn’t need to drive all the way over here.”

Wiping rain droplets from his beard, he offered a lopsided grin. “I was driving by anyway.”

“Liar.”

He chuckled and the ghost of their lost love drifted by the window in her mind.

Two years ago she’d have warmed instantly at his voice, his laugh, his presence.

Now, it was all she could do to keep her hackles from rising.

The floorboards behind her creaked and Rose jerked.

“Oh, uh, this is…” She put down the gauze and unopened butterfly closures. “Pete, this is Adam,” she said, gesturing to the figure moving to her side.

Even in the dark, Pete’s shock was evident.

Sometimes she forgot Adam was imposing with his height and broad frame. To her, he was a gentle giant who was obsessed with sweets and reality TV, who indulged her baby sister and her mom, who was patient and kind and good to his core.

A gentle giant who was well on his way to making her climax just that morning.

And now he was meeting her ex.

Great times all around.

“Oh, h-hey,” Pete stammered. “Nice to meet you, man.”

Adam’s energy was reserved, but he still managed to wave and sign a polite greeting.

“Um, sorry, I… I didn’t—”

“He said ‘hello, good to meet you,’” Rose cut in, already wanting this interaction to be over. “Adam uses ASL to communicate.”

“Oh.” Pete unzipped his coat. “This is the guy that washed up on shore, right? Jesus, I’m surprised he didn’t sink straight to the bottom.”

Adam arched an eyebrow. *“Apparently I’m a pretty good swimmer, so I’m sure that helped.”*

When Pete saw his hands moving again, he stared awkwardly.

“He’s mute,” Rose explained, her tone flat. “Not deaf. He can understand you just fine.”

“Right.” Pete nodded to Adam. “Sorry.”

“I’m sure you are.”

Coughing to cover a startled laugh, Rose hurried to move the conversation along.

“I appreciate you stopping, but really, we’re fine,” she said to Pete. “I heard the generator kicking on just a minute ago, so—”

“Who’s the asshole that blocked the back driveway?” Derek’s voice cut through the air as he strode through the dining room.

Rose rolled her eyes. This was going from bad to worse.

“Der—”

Her brother pulled up short next to the desk. “Seriously? You again?”

Pete huffed. “Nice to see you too, Derek.”

“Hey, don’t act like I’m out of line here,” Derek snapped, pointing a finger at the other man. “You’re the dick who keeps bugging my sister.”

“Right now you’re both bugging me,” she countered, setting the flashlight down with a thud. “And keep your voices down. This is still an inn with guests in their rooms.”

After a beat, both men muttered, “Sorry.”

It was almost imperceptible, but Adam shifted his stance, putting himself only a couple inches in front of Rose.

Between her and Pete.

Her sweet, gentle Golden Retriever was becoming her stoic, attentive guard dog.

“Why are you here, anyway?” Derek asked, still glaring at Pete.

“I wanted to make sure everyone was okay.”

He snorted. “You mean you wanted to make sure your possible investment didn’t get washed out to sea.”

“Derek,” Rose hissed, jabbing her brother in the ribs.

Adam glanced down at her. *“You haven’t told him no yet?”*

“Honestly, my mind’s been a bit preoccupied,” she muttered, giving him a weighted look she hoped he understood.

It had been less than a week and her life had turned into a Tilt-A-Whirl of major events.

She was allowed to forget to send a text or two.

Thankfully, Adam didn’t look disappointed or upset.

And he held his post in front of her.

“Pete, I appreciate you checking in, but we’re fine here,” she said.

He shoved his hands in his pockets but made no move to leave.

"You have enough fuel for the generator?"

Rose's face heated. She *thought* they had enough…

"I have extra out in my truck," Pete said. "I'll bring it in."

She arched a brow. "You just happened to have fuel canisters on you?"

"Good way to get blown up," Derek muttered, scratching at his stubbled jaw.

Pete ignored her brother. "Yeah, I do. I'll go get it. And I'll check your sandbags while I'm out there."

"Adam already did that," she said, pointing to him.

Flicking his gaze over Adam, Pete smirked. "I bet. Couldn't hurt though."

"Watch out for falling branches," Adam signed, expression deceptively neutral. *"Or… maybe don't."*

"What did he say?"

Rose gestured vaguely. "Just to be safe out there."

In the dim light of the flashlight, she saw Adam's lips twitch.

"Incorrigible," she signed to him when Pete wasn't looking.

"He could use a good knock to the head if you ask me," Adam signed back.

Rose bit back a laugh. *"You're not wrong."*

A blip of light next to her brought her head around to see Derek scowling at his phone.

"Have you heard from Everly?" He asked without looking up.

"No," she said, all humor draining from her. "I've called and texted, but she hasn't responded at all."

“A storm like this might’ve taken out some of the cell towers,” Pete said.

Derek clutched his phone like he wanted to snap it in half. “Great.”

Pulling his hood up, Pete turned to open the front door. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

Rose focused on her brother again. “What’s going on with you? You’re never this on edge.”

He looked like he wanted to bolt, but Derek finally relented.

“I…” He sighed roughly. “I kind of upset Everly about a week ago, and I haven’t gotten a chance to apologize.”

Rose frowned. “Upset her how?”

“Honestly, I… I’m not sure,” he said, raking his fingers through his dark hair. “We were catching up while I fixed the drip in the dishwashing sink, and I guess I said something stupid ‘cause she just… shut down.”

It was difficult to imagine Everly shutting down—even if she was irritated, she’d usually power through. Or call Derek out on being an idiot.

“And then she stopped responding to my texts, and now—” He took a breath, still pulling at his hair, making it stick up. “I’m just worried.”

Narrowing her stare, Rose asked, “Since when are you and Everly texting buddies?”

Faltering, he opened and closed his mouth twice before saying, “It’s mostly random stuff, you know, and things that need fixing here.” He pointed to Adam. “And stuff about you.”

“Me?” Adam blinked. *“Why?”*

“C’mon man, you’re either an alien, a criminal, or mermaid,” Derek said. “You’re a rich topic of discussion when two people are bored out of their minds.”

Rose swatted her brother’s arm. “Don’t talk about him like that.”

But Adam only shrugged and nodded. *“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”*

Shoving his phone back into his pocket, Derek took a deep breath. “I’m going over to Everly’s,” he announced, moving to the coat rack to grab his jacket. “Just to make sure she’s okay.”

“What happened to thinking this weather was too dangerous to drive in?”

Yanking his arms through the sleeves, he said, “Do as I say, not as I do.”

The door flung open again and Rose started to ask Pete if he needed help when she realized the figure was too short to be her ex.

“Well that sucked,” Everly called, voice muffled a bit from her chunky knit scarf wrapped all the way to her mouth. “My landlord is going to have a field day with his insurance company. Talk about an act of God.”

“Ev?” Rose angled the flashlight on her best friend. “Are you okay?”

“I’m drenched and cold but otherwise—Oh!”

Her response was cut off by Derek hauling her up into a fierce bear hug, lifting her off her feet and swinging her in a half circle.

Everly’s gasp turned into a shocked laugh. “Hi to you too, Der.”

Putting her down, he kept his hands on her shoulders as if assuring himself that she was solid and unhurt.

“What, did you think I washed away?” She teased, unwinding her scarf from her neck.

Derek only stared for a long moment before releasing her and backing up abruptly.

“Rose was really worried about you,” he said, voice hoarse.

She was certain confusion had etched into every corner of her face.

“Uh, yeah, I mean, you didn’t return my calls and—”

“Oh God, you’ll never believe what I did,” Everly groaned. “I was using it as a flashlight while I fixed my window, and I knocked the damn thing off the ladder and now it won’t turn back on.”

As she extricated herself from her layers of clothing, Derek tapped her elbow.

“Let me take a look,” he said quietly, holding out his hand.

Everly pursed her lips. “You work for the Apple store now?”

He didn’t balk. “I have to fix Zoey’s all the time. I can probably get it to work again.”

Her features softened and she dug it out of her coat pocket.

“Thanks, Derek,” she murmured.

Making an affirmative noise at the back of his throat, he took her phone and disappeared into the dining room.

After a beat of silence, Everly jerked her thumb over her shoulder. “Also did I see Pete out there dragging a kerosene tank?”

Adam nodded at the same time Rose sighed.

“Unfortunately.”

She chuckled. “Checking up on his possible investment, huh?”

“That’s what Derek said—”

“Oh God, the fridge,” Everly blurted, dropping the rest of her stuff next to Rose. “Please tell me the generator is still on.”

She didn’t wait for an answer, instead taking off at a run to the kitchen.

Rose slumped forward on her elbows, leaning on the wooden desktop.

“Today’s been really weird,” she groaned into her hands.

She felt Adam lean down and place a kiss to the top of her head.

It jolted her memory and she straightened. “Oh my God, your cut.”

He rasped out a chuckle and she guided him back to the stool.

"Sit," she ordered. "And if you're a good patient, you'll get a treat."

Adam's grin was almost as bright as the flashlight in her hand.

* * * * * * *

East Cove managed to survive the storm mostly intact. The damage total the next day had been record breaking but thankfully no one had been hurt.

The next day was devoted to clean up and calling her insurance adjuster, but due to the volume of claims, she'd been put on a waitlist.

Pete had texted too, asking when they could have their business dinner and not-so-subtly hinting that if she took his money, she could cushion a bit of the financial blow of repairs and replacing damaged exterior décor.

Rose left him on read.

She needed to think more about it, away from the noise and opinions of everyone else.

Really, the only person she needed to consult was Everly, but she was up to her eyebrows in planning the new brunch menu and writing up catering plans to offer for elopements, small weddings, and events held at the Whittaker.

Pete would just have to wait.

Stopping in at the bank to ask about an extension to their line of credit for immediate repairs, and then to the post office to mail out advertising materials, Rose was in desperate need of coffee.

Her phone vibrated in her pocket, and she pulled it out to check her notifications.

Adam: HI! ARE YOU ON YOUR WAY BACK? EVERLY IS MAKING MUFFINS!

Rose chuckled to herself, letting her feet take her in the direction of the Scuttlebutt.

She didn't regret getting Adam a cellphone, but she probably should have explained he didn't have to type everything in all caps.

Adam: ALSO I MISS YOU!

He ended that message with about a dozen kissing emojis and another dozen hearts.

Zoey had been the one to explain those to him.

She would never admit it, but she loved how enthusiastically he used them.

Rose: I just finished my errands and I'm getting coffee. Want a hot chocolate?

Adam: YES PLEASE! I LOVE YOU!

Another string of hearts and kissing emojis lit up her screen while Rose's heart double timed. She wasn't sure she'd ever get used to those words coming from him, whether in person or virtually.

Adam: YOU STILL DON'T HAVE TO SAY IT BACK! I JUST LIKE TELLING YOU! I NEVER WANT YOU TO FORGET!

Rose smiled at her phone as she opened the café door and stepped in.

"Oh hey, Rose," Sarah called from behind the counter. "You want your usual?"

"And a hot chocolate, extra whip cream, extra chocolate sauce," she said, slipping her cell back into her pocket.

"You got it."

She leaned against the counter, waiting for her order and glanced down at the day old newspaper left on a nearby table.

The top story was about the storm, the one below the fold was about a pet adoption drive.

East Cove was not exactly a happening place.

Someone delicately cleared their throat behind her, and Rose looked up.

Shit.

Odette offered a tentative smile, clutching her hands in front of herself.

“Hello,” she said, shifting her weight. “I hope it’s alright that I’m… here.”

Rose straightened. “I might be the mayor’s daughter, but I don’t have the power to ban anyone from local businesses.”

Adjusting her shawl, Odette glanced around, seeming lost and a bit uncomfortable.

Okay, a lot uncomfortable.

“Could we… talk?”

“About what?”

Odette’s lips pinched together for a moment. “I wanted to apologize for my mother’s behavior.”

When the barista called Rose’s name, she turned and picked up both to-go cups.

“Oh, you’re on your way out,” Odette said, gaze dropping to the drinks in her hands. “I promise I’ll be quick.”

Rose should have left. Should have told her she wasn’t in the mood to talk.

Instead, she nodded and went to the nearest empty table.

“Thank you,” Odette murmured, pulling out a chair and gracefully sitting across from her. “Is one of those for Dex—Um… Adam?”

Forcing the tension out of her shoulders, Rose said, “Yeah. He hates coffee, but he’s obsessed with hot chocolate.”

“It’s the sugar,” Odette said with a smile.

When Rose looked at her questioningly, she said, “Our… family has a bit of a sweet tooth. We don’t get it very often, but when we do, we’re ravenous for it.”

“I guess that explains some of his eating habits,” Rose chuckled.

“He has quite the appetite,” she said. “I hope he isn’t thinning the school too much.”

What a strange turn of phrase…

“No, nothing like that,” Rose said, popping the lid off her coffee. “Adam’s been a huge help to all of us. He’s really insistent on pulling his weight.”

Odette smiled and a deep longing crossed her stare. “That sounds like my brother.”

As she sipped her Americano, silence stretched between the two women to an awkward level. Each shifted their weight, glanced around the room, examined their nails and the table in front of them.

“So…” Rose finally said. “Your mom.”

“She was unnecessarily rude to you,” Odette said, frowning as she folded her hands. “I’m mortified by how she treated you.”

“I’ve dealt with worse on the T after a Bruins game,” Rose told her over the lip of her cup.

Uncertainty clouded her eyes, but Odette didn’t linger. “My mother isn’t used to being questioned. Where we’re from, she’s…” She shrugged. “The boss.”

“Sounds like a lot of families.”

“Yes, I suppose it does,” she said. “Our family has a very strict hierarchy. Dexhart—I mean, Adam—and my mother always butted heads because of it.”

Rose eyed her. “It’s hard to imagine Adam wanting to be top dog.”

“No, nothing like that,” she said, shaking her head. “My brother only cared about diplomacy and fairness. He wanted to make changes to how we do things. I think my mother saw it as—”

“A threat?”

“A statement that she’s becoming obsolete,” Odette said. “Or, her way of… governing.”

Furrowing her brow, Rose asked, “Governing? Not parenting?”

Odette’s expression became wistful. “My mother’s responsibilities go beyond her own bloodline.”

Again, Rose was baffled by the phrasing.

Where was Adam’s family from?

Leaning forward, Odette clutched her hands together tightly. “I promised I wouldn’t take up too much of your time, so please forgive me for being abrupt, but… I need you to understand that Dexhart cannot stay here.”

Rose sighed and started to gather her things.

“Wait, please,” Odette urged, reaching for her. “I don’t mean that he shouldn’t. I mean that he *can’t*. Soon it won’t be physically possible for him to stay.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Rose glared at her.

“He’s not… from here—”

“Lots of people move from one town to the other. It’s not that big of a deal.”

Odette shook her head, her dark brown hair falling over her shoulders. “My brother is… different from you. From all of you. He’s managed to stay here longer than most could, and I take that to mean he found such a way before his memories were taken. But eventually that method will fail him, and if he doesn’t remember who he is, then he’ll be in grave danger.”

Rose’s head started to spin.

She was speaking about Adam like he wasn’t…

Human.

“You care for him. Deeply,” Odette continued. “And for that, I am eternally grateful. Because if you do, then you’ll understand that while you may love him, you have to let him go.”

She struggled to take a breath.

“I—I’m not forcing Adam to leave,” Rose said. “He’s an adult. He can make his own choices. If he wants to stay here, he can.”

Odette laid her hand over Rose’s, and the familiar sensation of being unraveled coursed through her.

“You’re fiercely protective of my brother,” she murmured, locking eyes with her. “I saw it that night outside your inn. And I saw it in the way you stood up to our mother on his behalf. You…” She flashed a watery smile. “You are exactly who I would wish for my brother to give his heart to.”

The sincerity of her words threatened to knock Rose off her chair.

“And now I’m begging for you to use that bravery to save him,” Odette continued, aquamarine eyes shimmering like tidepools. “Convince him to return to us. Before it’s too late.”

It would have hurt less if the woman had just throat punched her instead.

“Is Adam… dying?”

Odette squeezed her fingers. “In a sense, yes.”

Air.

Rose needed air.

“I’m sorry, Rose,” she whispered. “I’m sorry this is how your story must be written.”

Releasing her, Odette pulled her teal shawl tighter around her shoulders and went to stand.

“Isla.”

She glanced at her again, brows furrowed.

“That Isla woman your mother mentioned,” Rose croaked. “Can’t she help?”

Odette’s expression was somber. “We haven’t been able to find her yet.”

The world blurred around the edges.

Getting to her feet, Odette paused a few paces away from the table.

“Take him to the sea,” she said. “As often as you can. Perhaps… that will help.”

Before Rose could ask anything else, she was gone.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket and on autopilot she pulled it free to look at the screen.

Adam: I SAVED YOU ONE OF THE MUFFINS WITH TOO MANY CHOCOLATE CHIPS IN IT! AND ZOEY WANTS TO COME OVER TO TAKE MORE PICTURES FOR HER ART PROJECT! I LOVE YOU!

Totally numb, Rose sent back a heart emoji, put her phone away, and gathered both cups to take back to the Whittaker.

Back to Adam.

Chapter Nineteen

Something tugged Adam from the gentle current of sleep.

Warmth and softness and a light floral scent.

“C’mon sleepy head,” Rose’s voice cooed in his ear. “We’re going to miss it.”

Grunting deep in his throat, he rolled onto his side.

Dream-Rose continued to whisper to him, tickling his ear.

“I made you hot cocoa.”

Steam and the smell of rich chocolate filled his nose.

Feather light kisses trailed over his cheek and jaw.

“If you wake up, I’ll show you my boobs.”

Adam’s right eye cracked open, sleep-dazed stare falling on her scarlet braid and zipped up fleece jacket.

Rose laughed and suddenly he didn’t care so much about getting an extra few minutes of rest.

“Men are all the same,” she teased, tapping his nose with her index finger.

Then he saw where the hot chocolate smell came from—the to-go mug she held right by his face.

“Come on, if we hurry, we can still make it,” she urged, pulling the comforter away.

Adam stretched, yawning silently. *“What are we making?”*

“Nothing, we’re going somewhere,” she said. “Up, up, up.”

Taking his hand, she hauled him up until his legs were over the side of the mattress.

Finger combing his hair, he enjoyed the way Rose’s eyes tracked the movement, pupils dilating. Maybe he should wear his hair down today.

“You’re very…” He smirked. *“Chipper? Is that the word?”*

Stepping between his knees, she cupped his face and smiled. “That’s because I get to show you one of my favorite things.”

Leaning down, Rose kissed him with so much tenderness it made his chest ache.

He’d yet to make good on his promise from the morning she’d woken up in his bed. Not that he didn’t want to, but with everything going on, it felt selfish to bring it up.

But with Rose in his room again, her hands roaming his bare torso, just inches away from his stirring body, he wasn’t opposed to being selfish now.

Looping his arms around her hips, Adam pressed closer, letting his hands drift down over the curve of her ass.

She hummed appreciatively against him, and he grinned.

Maybe they could see this special thing after they—

“Alright you,” Rose said, breaking their kiss way too soon for his taste. “Stop flirting and get some pants on.”

Rasping out a chuckle, Adam hung his head. *“Can I flirt with you while I put them on?”*

“Only if you hurry.”

Squinting out his window, he then realized it was still dark outside.

“What time is it?”

“A few minutes before five,” she said.

Adam arched an eyebrow. *“Am I going running with you?”*

“No way, my runs are solo,” she said, flashing a smile. “This is for both of us.”

Standing, he crossed to the en suite bathroom and flicked on the light.

Leaning back out, he signed, *“Do I need to look nice for this?”*

“No?”

“Great, then I’m not shaving.”

She laughed as he closed the door behind him.

Making quick work of his morning routine, he relieved himself, washed, and brushed and then stepped back into the bedroom.

Rose was practically bouncing on her toes with excitement.

He loved seeing her bubbling over with joy. It made the air around her shimmer with a light that belonged solely to her.

Glancing at her clothing, Adam decided to attempt to match her with jeans, a tee shirt, and a shearling pullover her dad had given him.

And he left his hair down, just for her.

“Okay,” he signed, yanking his shoes on. *“Now what?”*

Rose beamed. “Now we start walking.”

Taking his hand, she pulled him out of the room and down the short hall to the employee exit. Adam was barely able to wave to Lex before he was out the door and surrounded by night.

“This way,” she said, keeping their fingers entwined.

Adam happily kept pace as Rose guided him down the lane and across the street in the direction of the beach. She led him through the public access and over the wooden boardwalk that cut through the sand dunes.

“Almost there,” she said, looking over her shoulder at him.

He wanted to tell her he knew what the beach was, but he kept his teasing to himself.

Their feet sank a bit in the sand as they trekked, but Rose didn’t slow even a little. Clearly she was taking their schedule seriously.

Checking her watch, she said, “I think we’ll only have to wait a minute or so.”

“For what?”

“Shh, you’ll see,” she said, smiling up at him.

Even in the dark, Rose was sure footed and confident. She knew this beach like it was a part of her.

If that was the surprise—discovering another piece of her heart that she didn’t show the rest of the world—then his early wake up call was more than worth it.

Leading him to a rocky outcropping, Rose released him only to climb up onto one of the many boulders.

“Your turn,” she said, offering her hand to help him up.

It took a couple tries but he finally made it.

“Okay, now turn that way,” she said, pointing to the horizon.

He did as she told him.

The inky void of the ocean and the rhythmic sound of waves would almost be enough to soothe him back to sleep if he wasn’t standing.

After a moment, the line dividing water and sky became clearer, lightening from black, to indigo, and then violet.

Seagulls cawed as they swooped by, searching the low tide for their breakfast.

Slowly, the world around them became a painting of light and sea. All shades of purples and blues melting together and split apart with a shock of gold, orange, and electric pink.

“The first clear sunrise after a storm,” Rose murmured, clutching his hand tightly. “I don’t know if there’s any science behind it but they’re always breathtaking.”

Adam’s lips parted as he watched the curve of the sun make it’s appearance, cresting over the distant waves.

“Grampy used to always wake me up to see them when I was kid staying over on his sailboat,” she continued. “Derek would gripe and sleep through them, but I couldn’t. They always felt like nature’s present just for me.” She breathed out a laugh. “Well, me and anyone else who got up that early.”

Adam squeezed her fingers to tell her he was listening. To tell her he never wanted her to stop talking.

“Growing up on the coast, you can’t help but feel like the ocean is a part of you,” she said. “You learn her language, her rhythm. You know you’re at her mercy when a bad Nor’easter hits, and you’re comforted by her when the heat of summer is just too much.”

The sun inched higher, casting a gradient of color all across the sky that reflected back from the shallows along the sand.

“I’ve loved the sea my whole life,” Rose said, staring out at the magnificence around them. “But the first day I was ever scared of her—angry even—was the day I found you.”

Adam’s head whipped around.

He didn’t dare interrupt her though.

“Seeing you get spat out like that, after God knows what happened to you in the water, it shook me to my core.” She tugged on the end of her braid nervously. “But I think… Even in that terrifying moment, I knew.”

He frowned slightly, watching her.

Finally, Rose looked up, holding his gaze. “Knew the ocean was bringing you to me.”

Adam’s heart caught in his throat. He struggled to swallow, to inhale, but he refused to move an inch should it shatter the moment forever.

“So no matter what—no matter the storms that hit or king tides that flood or waves that capsize—I’ll always be thankful to her.” Rose pressed a

kiss to the back of his hand. “Because she brought me love.”

His restraint snapped.

Cupping her face, Adam hauled her into a fierce, bruising kiss that lit him up from the inside as if he’d swallowed a rising sun.

Wrapping her arms around his neck, Rose clung to him, careful not to tip them off the rock they stood on.

He wouldn’t have cared if she did. He’d catch her.

He’d always catch her.

“I love you,” she whispered against his bottom lip.

Three words that split him open like the sky at dawn.

Adam’s knees wobbled and his heart thundered behind his sternum.

Wetness flecked his cheeks and for a moment he wondered if it was sea spray or even rain drops.

Tears.

Rose was crying.

Pulling back, he frowned, running his thumbs over the twin rivulets streaking her face.

“Are you okay?” He mouthed, unwilling to let go to use his hands.

Nodding weakly in his hold, Rose blinked up at him, blue eyes shining in the morning light.

“Adam, I… I have to tell you something,” she whispered, voice breaking.

He stared expectantly, still soothing her with his touch.

“Your sister talked to me,” she said, fighting more tears. “She said… You might be sick. That eventually—” She sniffed delicately. “You’ll have to leave. She made it seem like…”

Her hands gripped his wrists, but she didn’t pull him off her.

“Like you’re…”

The corner of his mouth twitched. *"A merman?"* He mouthed.

Rose let out a heaving breath. "God, it sounds insane. *I* sound insane." She shook her head. "All this time I've told everyone else they're ridiculous for entertaining the idea—for falling for one of Grampy's fish tales. And then your sister finds me at the Scuttlebutt and suddenly I'm team mermaid."

He couldn't help but chuckle deep in his chest.

"Maybe I swallowed some seawater, I don't know," Rose exclaimed, dropping her forehead to his shoulder. "Saying it aloud feels absurd, but…"

He dropped a kiss to her temple before easing his hands away from her face.

"But too many strange things have happened," he signed.

Rose wiped the remnants of her tears from her lashes. "Adam, if this is even remotely possible, and your sister is right—"

"I made a promise to you, Rose," he signed. *"I'm not going anywhere."*

"But what if staying here is killing you?"

He shrugged and he knew she hated how nonchalant he was.

"Adam."

"I don't feel sick," he signed. *"I don't feel like I'm dying. I don't even feel particularly inhuman."*

He took her hand and pressed it to his heart.

"This feels strong, right?" He asked. *"Does it beat differently than yours?"*

After a moment, she shook her head. "No."

"Exactly."

She sighed. "But, Adam—"

“I know, I know,” he signed, ducking to catch her gaze. *“It feels like another storm is looming. But we don’t know that my sister is right. We don’t know* ***anything*** *yet.”*

Rose swallowed. “Doesn’t that scare you?”

It should. He should be quaking with anxiety.

The possibility of something completely out of his control taking him away from the one person who had his heart should have turned his blood to ice water and driven him mad with fear.

But in that moment, under a dawn painted sky and the ocean breeze kissing their skin, Adam felt only soul blazing love.

If what his sister said was true, and he had to leave, he would find a way back.

The ocean had already sent him to Rose once.

He’d make sure it did it again.

“The only thing I’m afraid of,” he started, smiling down at her. *“Is ruining this beautiful morning with any more tears.”*

He gently swiped his knuckle under her eye, catching the last drop of her sorrow.

“Nothing will take my love from you,” he signed. *“Not distance, not even death.”*

“Don’t say that,” she pleaded, gripping the front of his pullover.

He smirked. *“Because you don’t think it’s true, or because you’re worried I’ll jinx it?”*

“Maybe a bit of both,” she admitted, glancing down.

Kissing her forehead, he nodded in understanding. *“Then I’ll just have to keep proving it to you,”* he signed, smiling into her hair.

With a shuddering inhale, Rose straightened, staring into his eyes.

“You already have,” she murmured. “I think it’s my turn to do some proving of my own.”

Wrapping her in a tight hug, Adam turned her so her back was pressed to his chest and his arms were banded across her abdomen.

Watching the sun fully emerge from the ocean, they lingered in silence as the world woke up around them.

As the tide started to ebb closer, Adam stuck a deal with the sea.

If he could keep Rose’s love, the water could keep his past life.

Maybe he was a merman before, but now…

Now he only wanted to be hers.

* * * * * * *

East Cove wasn’t exactly the pinnacle of entertainment, but the town did its best and the high school’s yearly Spring Fling was one such occasion met with joyous enthusiasm.

And a massive crepe paper and balloon budget thanks to the vicious lobbying of the PTA.

It also meant the McClearys were not only expected to attend, but volunteer in some capacity. Rose’s father manned the ticket counter, while her mother helped at the school’s extra-curricular information station—hawking sweatshirts and drink koozies in the name of giving the German club decent materials.

Even Everly donated everything for a cookie decorating table and offered to run it.

Rose just wrote the school a check and promised the teaching staff discounts on beer and wine at the Whittaker.

She wasn’t really the booth-manning type.

With Adam glued to her side, they trekked up to the high school gymnasium, past several rickety looking fair rides set up in the parking lot.

Before he could even ask, she said, “Absolutely not. We’re not getting splattered on the concrete by a janky Scrambler.”

Looping his arm around her waist, he tugged her close and kissed her temple, smiling at her ridiculous protective streak making an appearance yet again.

Above the entrance, a giant paper banner painted with ‘East Cove Spring Fling’ in bright colors flapped in the breeze.

“We don’t have to stay very long,” she told him as they opened the heavy metal doors. “I just have to show my face and do my daughter-of-the-mayor duties and then we can leave.”

Adam started to nod when chimes and tinny music followed by laughter cut through the tiled lobby. His bright eyes widened.

“What was that?” He signed, picking up his pace.

“I don’t know,” she said, distracted by pulling out their entry fee cash. “Maybe the water pistol thingy?”

Approaching the ticket table, Rose waved to her dad.

“Hey, you two,” he called, leaning over the folding table covered in pink tissue paper flowers. “Derek just got here a few minutes ago but I don’t know which direction he went.”

“I’m sure we’ll run into him,” she said, handing over the money. “Not like he’s hard to miss.”

Rose stared behind him at the crowded gym and the rows and rows of games and concessions stands.

“So, pitiful turn out, huh?”

Her dad laughed. “Oh yeah, not sure how we’ll ever recover.” Waving her closer, he snuck her a handful of quarters from a stash under the table and winked. “Don’t spend them all in one place.”

“Did you tell Derek that?”

“You think I gave Derek quarters?”

Smirking, she didn’t have a chance to respond before being pulled into the gym by her empty hand.

“Oh!”

“You didn’t tell me there would be games,” he signed excitedly.

Rose laughed as he hooked his arm through hers.

Weaving between the throngs of people, his stare bounced around, barely able to stay on one thing for very long.

“What’s this one?” He signed, pointing at the milk bottle toss.

Explaining the rules to him, Rose warmed at the delight on his face.

Adam pointed to the game next to it—a skee ball machine—and she told him the rules of that one as well.

“Can we play?”

“Sure,” she said with a smile. “But I promised Zoey we’d come say hi first.”

Nodding in understanding, Adam tried—and failed—to hide his disappointment at leaving the flashing booth.

“I think she’s down this way,” Rose said, scanning the room.

Maneuvering around a parent dressed in a clown costume making balloon animals for a crowd of younger children, Rose could feel Adam’s excitement in his fingertips.

“We’ll get you one in a minute,” she said over her shoulder.

Adam tapped a ‘thank you’ on the inside of her wrist.

Between a face painting table and ‘Guess How Many in the Jar’ raffle, Zoey operated the ring toss booth with a wide, fake smile pinching her features and school color bows clipped into her pigtails.

Adam waved to her with enough force it shook Rose.

“Oh, thank God,” Zoey sighed. “Can you get me a hot dog? I’m starving.”

“Hi to you too,” Rose chuckled.

“Hi Adam,” Zoey said, sticking her tongue out at her sister.

“What’s this game?” He signed, craning his neck to look at the various materials behind her.

Handing over three plastic rings, Zoey smiled. “Try it. First round’s on Rose.”

“Gee, how generous of you,” Rose muttered.

“What do I do?”

“Take those—” Zoey pointed at the rings. “And throw them onto the pegs. If you hit a blue peg, you win one of these,” she said, gesturing to the cheap stuffed animals hanging above her.

As Adam figured out the mechanics of it all, Rose leaned her hip on the booth to watch.

“I’m so mad I’m here,” Zoey told her. “I begged to work the photobooth but they’re only letting seniors do it ‘cause it’s *expensive equipment*.” She rolled her eyes. “As if anyone on the hockey team knows how to replace a blown flashbulb.”

Attempting a sympathetic statement, Rose felt someone behind her and turned.

Three teen girls lingered at the end of the face painting table, staring openly at them.

“Uh… Hi?” Rose said.

One bold girl in a high ponytail and pink sparkle eyeshadow leaned forward.

“Is that *Adam?*” She asked, blinking doe-eyed past Rose’s shoulder.

Rose opened her mouth to speak but Zoey cut her off, practically jumping out of the booth window.

“Yeah, he’s with my sister,” Zoey exclaimed.

Nothing like the social capital of knowing the town anomalous legend.

“Adam, say hi,” Zoey ordered, gesturing to him.

Jerking his head up, Adam beamed and waved with one of the plastic rings in hand.

A collective giggle overtook the girls, and they whirled around to huddle together.

“He’s so much cuter in person.”

“I like his hair.”

“He’s *so tall*.”

Smirking, Rose turned back to her sister. “Somebody’s getting invited to a ton of birthday parties this year.”

“Oh yeah. I can’t wait.”

The rapid *tink-tink-tink* of plastic against peg caught their attention and Rose did a double take.

“Did I do it right?” Adam asked.

All three rings were hooked on the same blue peg, still swaying and spinning.

“Sure did!” Zoey clapped. “Pick your prize.”

Choosing a ridiculously large stuffed lobster, Adam smiled as he manipulated it’s fuzzy red claws to make it dance and wave.

“Are you going to give it to Rose?” Zoey asked.

Curiosity raised his brows. *“Should I?”*

Rose coughed out a laugh. “No, thank you. You can keep him for yourself.”

“We can share him,” Adam signed, bopping her on the nose with one of the claws.

As they started to walk away, Zoey called, “Don’t forget my hotdog.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

With every passing moment, the energy shifted in the gym. A buzz of voices followed them, curious stares tracked them.

By the time they got to the confectionary tables and popcorn stand, Adam’s name was on everyone’s lips.

And for the first time since he became the topic of town gossip, Rose didn’t care.

If it didn’t bother him, she wouldn’t let it bother her.

Nudging him, she jerked her chin over towards the cookie table. “There’s Everly. And… Derek.”

Her brother was sandwiched between two children about six or seven years old, icing bag in hand.

And Everly looked ready to strangle him.

“Would you please let me—”

“No, I told you, I’ve got it.”

“Okay, well you clearly don’t, so—”

“Stop that, I’m doing just fine.”

Bent over in fierce concentration, Derek had a large egg shaped cookie pinned to the table with one hand and a pipet bag in the other.

“You’re not holding the nozzle correctly,” Everly told him, hovering at his shoulder. “The icing’s going to smear.”

“Are you this bossy with the kids?” Derek asked. “Or is that tone reserved for me?”

Everly crossed her arms. “What do you think?”

“Hi, guys,” Rose interrupted gently. “Derek, I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but this is a *children’s* activity.”

“I didn’t see an age limit sign,” he said without looking up from the line of pink he was squeezing out onto the shortbread.

“Remind me to make one for next time,” Everly muttered.

Glancing up, Derek spotted the stuffed lobster in Adam’s grip and snorted. “You’re one to talk about kid stuff.”

“Hey, Adam won him fair and square,” she told him. “And we’re sharing custody—we each get three days and then we split Sunday.”

“Should we name him?” Adam signed, grinning at her.

She lifted her chin. “He looks like a Sebastian to me.”

Looking at the polyester and plastic button face, Adam nodded. *“Sebastian it is.”*

“You two are adorable,” Everly said with a giggle.

Rose stared pointedly at her brother. “Shouldn’t the icing go on the cookie instead of the table?”

“Oh geez, *Derek*.” Everly grabbed a handful of paper towels, rushing over.

“I’ll clean up when I’m done,” he assured her. “I promise.”

“Right, like I believe that.”

When he waved her off for a third time, she gave up.

Flashing a tight smile at Rose, she asked, “You sure you don’t want to hang out and help moderate?”

“I think you’ve got it covered,” she said with a smirk.

“Your kindness knows no bounds.” Everly squatted to open the cash box and retrieved a few bills. “Would you mind grabbing me a drink? I think all the powdered sugar is giving me a dry throat.”

Before Rose could take the money from her, Adam reached out and took it.

"I'll go," he signed. *"I want to see if they have anything with chocolate."*

Passing the stuffed lobster to Rose, he practically ran off, giddiness radiating off him in waves.

"You didn't tell him about the fudge stand?"

"I figured he'd see it on his own eventually."

Two parents approached with their four year old boy and Everly jumped to welcome them and show them a few tips before setting them loose on a large, round sugar cookie.

When she returned to Rose, mischief glinted in her eyes.

"So, you and Adam seem… comfortable."

Shoving her hands into her jacket pockets, Rose fought a grin. "I suppose that's because we *are* comfortable."

"Does this mean things are *officially* official?"

"I haven't hard launched him on my Instagram, if that's what you're asking."

Everly waved a hand out. "You know what I mean. Are you two…?"

"I don't know," Rose drawled. "Does telling each other we love them count?"

The squeal that erupted from Everly was enough to cause tinnitus.

Jerking back, Derek streaked the table with icing while cursing under his breath.

"Sorry, sorry," she called to the concerned onlookers. "I'm very vocal about school spirit."

Grabbing Rose by the forearm, she shook her lightly.

“This is so great,” she said, smiling so wide it threatened to crack her face. “I’m so happy for you.” She dropped her voice to a whisper. “How is he in bed?”

Rose choked. “Oh my God, Ev.”

“What?” She batted her eyelashes. “I’m a curious person. And, you know, he looks like he’d be spectacular, so…”

Derek grunted. “I’m right here you know.”

Rolling her eyes, Everly said, “No one’s forcing you to stay.”

“I’m not done with my cookie.”

Rose pointed to his cheek. “You’ve got icing in your beard.”

“Damn it, still?” He rubbed his face in the crook of his elbow.

With her brother distracted, she whispered, “We haven’t actually… slept together yet.”

Everly’s eyes widened. “So you went old school, huh? Feelings first, then the fun stuff. Nice, I like a retro vibe.”

“Wow, I really wish those bleachers would collapse on top of me right about now.”

Poking her in the stomach, Everly teased, “You know you love me.”

Glancing over at Derek again, Rose tugged her friend away from the table a few paces.

“Hey, are you and Derek… fighting?”

Tucking a stray curl behind her ear, Everly frowned. “What do you mean?”

“The day of the storm, he was super freaked out about you being caught out,” she said. “And then when I asked him about it, he said he upset you or something? And he felt bad that he hadn’t been able to apologize.”

Her expression shuttered and she shifted her weight. “Oh, uh… It wasn’t anything serious. He just pushed too many of my buttons in one day,

that's all."

Everly was lying.

She didn't know why, but her best friend was lying to her.

But standing between the caramel corn stand and the cookie decorating table wasn't the place to confront her about it.

Rose tilted her head. "That's Derek for you," she said, keeping her tone light. "Sorry he's been such a pain. I can talk to him if you want."

"No, no, it's okay," she said. "I'm just torturing him a little more before I tell him we're simpatico again."

"Well if you need any pointers on how to piss him off…"

A figured appeared next to her, and Rose jumped.

"Adam, what—" She faltered, gaping at him. "Where did you get all of this?"

He couldn't sign to explain, as his hands were comically full of cotton candy on a stick, a funnel cake, and deep-fried Oreos. Instead, he jerked his head towards the concession stands.

Wiggling his elbow, he indicated the giant bottle of water he'd retrieved for Everly tucked into the bend of his arm.

"Oh, thanks, sweetie," she said, taking it from him.

"How did you have the cash for this?" Rose asked.

Before he could try to pantomime an answer, an older man in a golf shirt strolled up and called him by name.

"This is from all of us at the Rotary Club," the man said, passing Adam an obscenely large bag of cheddar popcorn and a balloon animal in the shape of a dolphin on a string. "You're a real hero, son."

Smiling, Adam tried to wave but couldn't risk dropping any of his food.

"Oh." Rose blinked as the man left. "That makes sense actually."

Bending down, Adam took a messy bite of cotton candy that got stuck to his nose.

“This is your heaven, isn’t it?” Rose chuckled, taking some of his treats for safe keeping.

Nodding with vigor, he offered her the cotton candy, but she declined.

“I’ll take a deep-fried Oreo though.”

Behind them, she heard her brother’s strained voice and turned to see him holding a five-dollar bill out to the six-year-old girl next to him.

“Please?” Derek waved the money towards her. “It’s just a cookie. With this you can buy, like, five other cookies.”

“But I made this one,” the girl argued.

“Technically you decorated it,” he said. “You didn’t make it.”

“You’re just mad ‘cause your cookie is ugly.”

Offended, he straightened and glared down at her. “It is not, you little—”

“Derek,” Rose chided. “How many kids are you going to pick a fight with in a calendar year?”

Taking the opportunity to escape, the little girl grabbed her perfectly iced and sprinkled egg cookie and ran off towards the bounce castle.

“Good job, Rose,” Derek retorted. “You ran her off.”

Everly snatched the icing from him. “You are shameless.”

Picking up his sloppy, red-drizzled egg, Derek shrugged. “Sometimes you gotta know when to outsource.”

Laughing to herself, Rose glanced over at Adam only to see he had even more cotton candy than before.

“Where did *this* come from?”

His only answer was to jerk his chin in the direction of whichever random person had brought him the gift.

“Alright, c’mon,” she said, tugging him by the arm. “Let’s go burn some of that sugar off with a game of corn hole.”

* * * * * * *

It became very clear, very quickly that Adam was skilled at every game at the carnival.

Well, almost every game.

He gave the toy fishing pond—complete with gold fish prizes—one look and immediately cringed away, turning to the basketball hoops instead.

Rose enjoyed getting to show off her prowess with the balloon darts, winning an East Cove High travel coffee mug.

“I think my dad has five of these already,” she said, turning it over in her hand. “He keeps thinking he’s lost them and buys another, and they all end up under the seats in his car.”

Glancing up at Adam, she faltered.

“Really?” She eyed the bright candy apple in his hand. “Again? Who keeps giving you food?”

Lifting his eyebrows, Adam gestured towards the passing crowd as if that was explanation enough.

“You’re going to be so sick later,” she laughed, shaking her head.

Smirking with sticky lips, he tilted the apple towards her, offering her a bite.

“I should probably say no…”

Instead, she darted forward and bit into the side of the candy coated Granny Smith.

She barely had time to chew before Adam ducked, kissing her with sugary delight.

“Better cut that out or we’ll get detention,” she teased.

Dark brows lifted to his hairline, and she added, “I’m kidding. C’mon, let’s go see what other prizes we can win.”

They were greeted every few feet by someone new—students waving and calling Adam by name, teachers smiling and saying hello, parents or older adults saying short niceties or thanking him for his heroic action.

Adam, true to his nature, simply smiled and nodded, signing the occasional ‘I’m just glad the boy is okay,’ that she happily translated.

Rose looped her arm through Adam’s, showing him off with pride.

He’d saved a child’s life.

He’d been there for the town.

And above all else, he loved her, and she loved him.

“Hey, I have an idea,” she said, looking up at him.

Adam offered her the last of his candy apple in response.

“No, no, over here,” she said, pulling him along with her. “Let’s get our picture taken.”

Slowing only to hand the teenager working the photobooth the right amount of cash, Rose pushed back the red velvet curtain and ushered Adam inside with her.

Squeezed in tight, she grinned at him.

“Okay, so this will give us a count down,” she said, pointing to the screen. “And it’ll take several pictures in a row.”

“Like Zoey’s camera?”

“Except faster,” she said, punching the button. “Ready?”

Nodding, Adam leaned in, flashing a megawatt smile at the screen.

When the flash went off, Rose changed her expression, sticking her tongue out. Adam held up their stuffed lobster between them, wiggling his

claws.

The flash went off again and Rose directed them to make another silly face. As soon as Adam crossed his eyes and puffed out his cheeks, she burst into a fit of laughter that was caught by the next snap of the camera.

“Oh no, I messed that one up.”

Shaking his head, Adam reached for her, eyes lit up with enamored joy.

Pulling her into his lap, he cupped her face just in time for the final picture to capture him pressing his lips to hers.

Clutching the front of his shirt, Rose deepened the kiss with a fiery need that had her wondering if they could escape the carnival and go straight home to pick up where they’d left off.

“Um, I think your pictures are done,” a timid voice called from outside the curtain.

Breaking away with a soft hiccup, Rose answered, “Thanks so much.”

Looking as strained and desperate as she felt, Adam slid out of the photobooth first, taking the picture row from the kid running it.

As she stared down at their faces captured in black and white, Rose grinned.

“I like these,” Adam signed, handing the strip of photos to her. *“Especially this one,”* he added, tapping the second to last frame.

Not the photo of him kissing her, but the slightly blurry one of her laughing.

Emotion clogged her throat, and Rose swallowed convulsively.

While you may love him, you have to let him go, Odette’s voice echoed in her head.

Pain lanced through her.

After everything they'd been through, she didn't know if she could. She wasn't as brave as people thought. Rose was just a flawed human who wanted a piece of happily ever after for herself.

Just as she started to reach for his hand, an older woman about Grampy's age appeared holding a bright pink snow cone.

"My daughter told me what you did at the docks the other day," she said, handing the cone to Adam. "You're a very brave young man."

Smiling, Adam signed, *"Thank you. I'm glad the little boy is okay."*

Sensing her confusion, Rose translated, and the woman nodded.

"You two enjoy yourselves, now," she said as she wandered to the yarn crafts table.

Leaning into his shoulder, Rose murmured, "You should rescue a little kid before every big town event. It'll save us loads on snacks."

Adam snorted into his snow cone, and she doubled over in laughter.

* * * * * * *

After begging a tote bag off her mother for all of their prizes, and saying goodbye to Everly and the rest of her family, Rose led Adam out of the gym by the hand.

"My stomach hurts," he signed lethargically, frowning down at himself.

Rose chuckled. "Of course it does, you ate five pounds of pure sugar."

"I ate a hot dog too," he signed. *"And a pretzel. And peanuts. And a pickle."*

"Okay, now I'm going to be sick."

Reaching into her purse, the jangle of her keys was interrupted by a woman's voice and the patter of running footfalls.

“Oh, thank the currents! Do you know how long I’ve been looking for you?” The woman emerged from the shadows, panting as she called out to them. “Well, I’ll tell you. Weeks! I really should have planned better.”

Stunned, Rose could only stare at the stranger with wild, curly black hair streaked with silver. Her dark woven poncho flapped out behind her as she ran, and her voluminous handkerchief hem shirts were wet all the way up to her knees, clinging to her shins.

Pulling up short, the woman bent at the waist, catching her breath for several moments before glancing up at Adam.

“I suppose I should have known you’d wind up further north,” she said with a broad smile reminiscent of Adam’s. “You’ve always loved rockier coastlines.”

“I’m sorry, do I know you?” Adam signed, glancing from the woman to Rose and back.

Pride lit up her stare. “Did you pick up a new kind of sign language while you’ve been here? Oh, that’s wonderful! You were always so good with languages—not that you have much opportunity to use them all but it’s the effort that counts, right?”

Stepping in front of Adam, Rose frowned. “Can I help you?”

Pushing her hair out of her face, she turned.

In the yellow pool of lamplight, her eyes were dark and alert, and sparkled in a way that seemed otherworldly.

But what truly caught Rose’s attention was the woman’s chin and cheeks… and the single dimple on her left side. Just like Adam.

“Oh dear, please forgive me,” the woman said, waving her hand out. “My name is Isla.”

All the air in Rose’s lungs left her in a harsh exhale.

Isla.

The Isla.

The woman so many hopes were hinged on now stood in front of them, damp and flustered and… barefoot.

“You have no idea how worried I’ve been for my nephew,” she continued.

Both Adam and Rose jolted at the word.

“Nephew?” Rose repeated, eyes widening. “He’s—”

“I cannot begin to apologize enough, Dexhart,” Isla said, turning to him. “I mean, I know I’m a bit slapdash in my work, but this was bad even by my standards.”

“I don’t think I understand,” Adam signed. *“You’re… my aunt?”*

Isla squinted at the movements. “I’m not sure I caught all of that. Were you asking who I am?”

“Yes,” Rose answered for him.

“Ah, right, I see.” Isla nodded. “That is correct. I’m your mother’s sister.” Chuckling, she added, “Let me guess, that storm the other day was her doing. She’s always been the dramatic one in the family. She sent word for me, but I was searching the river mouths and estuaries near the Maryland Virginia border for you, so…”

Realizing she was being stared at in utter bewilderment, Isla slapped a hand to her forehead. “Oh, by the tides, I’ve done it again.”

Reaching under her knit poncho, she withdrew a conch shell the size of a softball.

“Here, let me fix my terrible mistake before I make things more complicated.”

Striding forward, Isla reared back and smashed the shell into the side of Adam’s head.

A blast of purple and white light illuminated the dark parking lot like a mini firework, and the air around them sizzled with spent power.

Rose cried out, lunging for Adam, but he dropped to the asphalt in an unconscious heap.

Isla winced. “That always looks so painful.”

Kneeling at his side, Rose cupped his face. “Adam? Adam, can you hear me?”

A thin trickle of blood wet the pad of her thumb and rage she’d never known boiled over in her chest.

Glaring up at Isla, she bared her teeth. “What did you do?”

“I promise, he’s fine,” Isla said, holding her hands out in a placating manner.

“You attacked him,” Rose snarled.

“He’s only stunned,” the other woman told her, as if discussing the weather. “He’ll come to and then we can all talk a bit more freely.”

Stroking his hair, Rose spoke softly to his profile. “Adam? C’mon, babe, open your eyes.”

Above her, Isla made a contemplative noise but didn’t comment.

“Please, Adam,” Rose murmured. “Wake up.”

His dark lashes fluttered—the first clue that he was coming back to himself.

Rose’s grip on him tightened. “That’s it, come on.”

Features scrunched, Adam rolled to his side, pushing himself up on one elbow.

He stared down at the ground, head swaying on his neck like his vertebrae were made of nothing but sponges and string.

The color drained from his face and Rose braced for him to be sick all over the asphalt.

“Hey,” she whispered. “Are you okay?”

For an excruciatingly long time, he didn’t look up, didn’t move.

“Adam?”

Finally, ocean-violet eyes met her gaze.

There was no unmoored, distant shadow lingering in his stare.

He still knew her.

And he knew who he was, as well.

Swallowing, Rose ignored the sandpaper in her throat.

“… Dexhart?”

Adam—*Dexhart*—nodded.

Stepping forward, Isla clasped her hands together in front of herself, watching them both.

“Perhaps we should go somewhere a bit more comfortable.” She looked down at her bare feet and then back up. “There’s quite a lot for us to discuss.”

Chapter Twenty

It was the most uncomfortable eight minute drive of Rose's life.

As she was getting Adam to his feet, Everly had come outside with a load of cookie decorating stuff and spotted them struggling.

She'd heard Rose cursing Isla out for hitting her nephew over the head and at that point, it was impossible to tell her everything was fine and that she could go home.

Several minutes and a lot of back and forth later, they decided Rose's cottage was the best place to talk.

And Everly would be joining.

"Oh, let her stay," Isla had interjected, waving a hand out. "It's not like she'll be confused by all the magic talk anyway."

"Yeah," Everly had said, nodding with determination. A second later she frowned. "Wait, what?"

"We can talk about that later," Isla had said, patting her arm.

Piled into Rose's 4Runner, Isla spent the time chattering away about her journey and all the delightful things she'd discovered on her way to finding Adam.

Dexhart.

Rose shook her head.

It felt wrong—like calling a cat a donkey. Maybe in one universe such a linguistic choice would make sense, but in this one it was wholly incorrect.

But now those universes were colliding.

It made her dizzy and a bit nauseated.

Once inside her cottage, the space seemed ill-suited for so many people all vibrating with energy at differing frequencies.

Her gaze rarely left Adam as he moved to the kitchenette bar and leaned back against it, folding his arms across his chest.

“My, what a dwelling you have here,” Isla said, turning in a slow circle to take it all in. “Such character. And I love the colors.”

“Thank you,” Rose said, voice sounding hollow.

Everly held up a finger. “Sorry, could you explain your previous statement to me in full? I’m feeling a bit lost.”

“In time, dear,” Isla said. “But I’m sure your parents would know just as much as I.”

“My…” Everly blinked. “Parents?”

“One thing at a time, I promise.”

“But—”

“Rose, could I trouble you for a glass of water?” Isla asked. “All that running has me parched.”

Nodding, she went to the sink and filled a glass for her. “Are you hungry?” She asked, feeling lost in her own home. “I have crackers, I think. And some frozen vegetables.”

“That all sounds delicious, but I don’t want to prolong your discomfort anymore than necessary,” Isla said with a smile. “I take it my sister didn’t do much in way of explaining the situation, correct?”

The other three nodded.

“Wonderful, then I get to do it.” Chugging the water, Isla set the glass down on the coffee table. “Dexhart—who you’ve been calling Adam—is Merfolk.”

No one spoke.

“I believe humans call us mermaids,” Isla continued. “But that’s a tad reductive for our race as a whole.”

Everly’s mouth fell open. “You’re…”

“No, no, no, not yet, dear,” Isla cut in gently with a grin. “You see, my sister Mira is Dexhart’s mother, and our queen. Which, of course, makes Dex a prince.”

Rose jolted, glancing to Adam.

A prince? A Merman prince?

That would explain some of his inherent confidence.

“I’m sorry, mermaids—I mean, Merpeople have queens and princes?”

Isla nodded. “Of course. It’s a perfectly valid way to govern ourselves, isn’t it?”

Rose opened and closed her mouth twice.

“Fair point. Please continue.”

“Mira and Dexhart had an argument over her latest endeavor,” Isla explained. “It was a… militaristic one.”

Adam finally lifted his hands, signing in a completely different way—like how Odette had demonstrated.

“What was that?” Rose asked.

His brows pinched together but Isla stepped up to translate.

“He said he didn’t agree with her stance,” she said. “And that he’d wanted to prove to her she was wrong in her prejudice.”

“Prejudice against who?” Everly asked.

Isla glanced at her. “Well, humans, of course.”

It didn’t shock Rose in the slightest.

If they were Merpeople, she could only imagine what they thought about humans. Climate change, pollution, over-fishing, the destruction of coral reefs and ecosystems in all the oceans… It was a wonder there were any surviving Merpeople at all.

“They fought,” Isla continued. “And Dex came to me for a favor.”

Looking to Adam, Rose caught the subtle shift in his expression.

"All Merfolk are born with magic, but not everyone has the talent or ability to cast complex spells," Isla said, gesticulating as she spoke. "Mira is the most skilled in such things, but obviously given Dex's request, she was not an option. So he came to me."

Her face fell and her fingers twisted.

"I just… forgot the specific wording of this spell and accidentally wiped Dexhart's memories." She pushed her wild, wavy curls out of her face. "That was *not* part of the plan, I swear, Dex. You were supposed to arrive topside fully aware and intact. Well, mentally anyway. You couldn't keep your tail, for obvious reasons."

"Tail?" Rose covered her face with her hands. "Oh my God."

Everly bounced a little on the balls of her feet. "I knew it," she exclaimed. "I just knew Adam couldn't be a regular guy who washed up naked one day during a storm."

Isla winced. "You washed up *naked*? Well that's two things I messed up."

With her mind whirring like an overheating engine, Rose closed her eyes for a moment.

"My papercut," she blurted out, eyes snapping open.

Adam frowned. *"Your what?"*

"It was one of the first nights you were here… I cut myself and you —well, you just sort of rubbed your finger over it, but it healed almost immediately." She held his stare. "Did you do that?"

He tilted his head in thought. *"I must have. But not on purpose."*

"Dex has always been a skilled healer," Isla said. "I've lost count of how many spear wounds you've healed over the years." Her expression turned wistful as she added, "Merfolk used to be called upon for sick and

injured human sailors. Once upon a time, before we were written out of your reality."

Once upon a time…

Humans and Merfolk had worked together. They'd been a part of the same community, part of the same world.

But that all had changed.

"I have a question," Everly started, looking to Isla. "How are you here?"

"I swam here, of course," Isla laughed lightly.

"I meant, how are you on land…?"

"Oh, I see. Merfolk can come to land whenever we like. We just can't stay longer than three days before having to return to the ocean."

Rose and Everly stared at Adam, brows raised and eyes wide.

"What?"

"You've been here for almost two months," Everly started.

"That's why Dexhart needed me," Isla said. "The spell I did was for him to retain a human form for much longer than his natural abilities would allow. I'm really going to have to work on the wording of said spell though, clearly it needs adjusting."

Rose stared up at him, watching for any little shift in his expression.

Longer.

Not 'as long as he likes,' just longer.

It was a distinction she couldn't shake.

"You dove into the water to save that child," she murmured. "Does… does that count as returning?"

Isla's dark brows curved up. "Did your tail come back?"

Adam shook his head. *"No, I stayed in my human form."*

The hopeful light in her eyes dimmed. “Oh. Then I’m sorry to say, no, it doesn’t.” Smoothing her hands over her poncho and skirt, she added, “To be away from our true form is detrimental. We give up so much to walk on land, coming back to ourselves is the only way we can recover.”

Weight pressed down on Rose’s chest.

She didn’t want Adam to be hurt by staying here. If he needed to return to the ocean, to his real form, then she wouldn’t stand in his way.

“How long was your spell supposed to last?” She asked Isla, voice frayed.

“Only about—”

Adam cut her off by signing in the language only they knew.

Anger lanced through the dread and sorrow, and Rose glared at him.

“Don’t you dare,” she snapped. “You’ve never lied to me, Adam. Don’t start now.”

Shame cast a shadow in his gaze. *“I’m sorry.”*

Stepping closer, she said, “How long?”

“Three months,” he signed. The skin around his eyes tightened. *“Technically, three full moons.”*

Trying to take a full breath, she did the math quickly in her head.

“So you have four weeks left?”

Isla’s skirts swished as she moved forward. “Don’t fret, dear. That’s plenty of time for us to work on convincing Mira to recast the spell and give Dexhart his legs more permanently.”

A muscle in his jaw fluttered. *“She’ll never agree to it. When we argued, she called me a traitor for wanting to live amongst humans.”*

Rose ignored the twinge of insult as Isla tsked.

“Then we’ll find another way,” Isla said. “You’ll need to go back to your real form for a little while, but a week or two apart isn’t an

insurmountable challenge.”

“What about recasting your spell?” Rose asked, still bewildered she was even discussing magic and Merpeople. “Three months on land, a week or two at sea isn’t such a bad schedule.” She flashed a weak smile. “We’re barely a mile from the beach. It wouldn’t even be long distance.”

Adam held her stare, deep emotion shining in his eyes.

Shrugging, she added, “I could even learn to scuba dive. We could have deep sea diving date nights.”

At that, he rasped out a chuckle and grinned, but his gaze turned watery.

He was starting to doubt—Adam never doubted. He’d always been the sure one, the confident one. Just that morning he’d told her he wasn’t afraid of anything taking him away from her. That his belief in their love was stronger than any other obstacle.

It was time for Rose to be brave for him now. To be sure and confident and strong.

To believe.

She had to believe in their future, however complicated it may be.

Isla shifted her weight, fidgeting with the damp fringe of her poncho. “I’d need time to alter the spell,” she said. “Perhaps your friend here could lend her magical talents as well.”

Everly’s eyes flared wide. “Why do you keep assuming I know anything about this kind of stuff?”

Tilting her head, Isla hummed. “Maybe your parents need to talk to you sooner rather than later.”

Existential shock etched into every corner of Everly’s face.

“Of course, even with changing the spell, there’s still the chance that…” Isla’s expression sobered. “That you’ll lose your memories again.”

Rose’s heart seized.

He would forget everything—who they were, his life, his past.

He would forget her.

“If I do things correctly, that chance is slim,” Isla attempted to reassure them. “But… it’s still possible.”

It would be like hitting the reset button every three months.

They’d be starting from scratch.

Adam began to sign something, but Rose shook her head.

“I would do it,” she said, holding his stare. “I’d find you again and again. Relearn everything with you each time you washed ashore. If all we got were three months of discovering each other only to have to start over, I’d happily measure my life by the full moon.”

He blinked and a single tear fell from his lashes.

“It isn’t fair to you,” he signed.

Her lips twitched. “Life doesn’t have to be fair to be beautiful.”

Warring emotions clouded his stare but finally, his spine straightened and the violet in his eyes shone like a vibrant dawn.

“Try to fix the spell,” he signed to Isla. *“It’s a chance I’m willing to take.”*

Clapping her hands together, Isla beamed. “Excellent! Now, where is your potions room?”

“Uhh…” Rose looked to Everly. “We have a kitchen. Would that work?”

Isla brushed her black and silver curls back. “I’m sure it’ll do just fine.”

“Ev?” Rose started. “Could you show her around?”

Straightening to attention, her friend nodded. “Yes, of course.”

Heading towards the door, the two women matched each other's pace.

"Do you think you could explain more about this whole magic thing to me while we do this?" Everly asked. "I'm kind of freaking out here."

With a gentle pat on her arm, Isla said, "No need to be afraid, dear. Magic is much more common than you'd think."

As the door closed, Rose heard Everly say, "I'm not sure that makes me feel better."

In the resounding silence, they stood across from each other barely moving a centimeter.

She could only stare as she pieced together their new reality.

Adam was a Merman.

Adam was actually Dexhart.

Adam—

Shoving away from the kitchenette bar, he stalked towards her, gathering her up in a vise-like hold.

Rose only had time to inhale before his lips crushed against hers, one hand tangling in her braid at the back of her head while the other pressed at her low back, pinning her to him.

He still felt like Adam. Still kissed like Adam.

As he slanted his mouth over hers, slipping fire into her veins with every movement of his body, Rose could only cling to him, yielding to the storm he conjured around them both.

Breaking apart only a fraction, he caught her eye and smiled.

Her heart kicked in her chest.

He still loved her like Adam too.

Leaning down, he hooked both arms behind her thighs and lifted, wrapping her legs around his waist.

“Mhmph, Adam,” she half yelped, half giggled. “What—”

Staring up at her, he arched an eyebrow suggestively and grinned, walking them both to the other side of the room.

To her bed.

Setting her down gently on top of the plush comforter, he tipped over her, trailing kisses down the side of her throat.

Gripping the back of his neck, she gasped as he nipped her earlobe and dragged his teeth along the exposed curve of her collarbone.

In an urgent fumbling of limbs, Adam shoved at her jacket and tugged up the hem of her shirt, trying to undress her as quickly as possible.

When her jacket hit the floor, Rose grabbed for his hands.

“Adam, wait,” she panted.

Immediately, he stilled, staring down at her with blazing eyes.

She winced. “I mean, I guess I should call you Dexhart—”

He cupped her face, shaking his head. Kissing the bridge of her nose and the center of her forehead, he released her.

“I’m Adam,” he signed. *“I only ever want to be Adam with you.”*

“But it’s not your name—”

“It is now,” he urged. *“I’m **your** Adam. And that never has to change.”*

Flushed and in a haze, her lashes fluttered as she tried to regain some composure.

Which was becoming more difficult by the second with him pressed against her.

Kissing her tenderly, he smiled against her bottom lip.

“I am yours, Rose,” he signed. *“There’s no one else.”*

Realization dawned, making her breathing hitch.

Rose hiccupped, fighting back a fresh wave of tears that threatened to spill down her cheeks. “Your memories… You mean…”

Adam nodded. *“I told you,”* he signed. *“I knew in my bones that I was yours and yours alone.”*

Something snapped into place deep in her core, tethering them together.

“Make it real,” he pleaded, dropping his forehead to hers. *“Claim me, Rose.”*

The words seared her insides, reigniting the fire within her.

Surging forward, she captured his lips, sinking her teeth into his bottom lip until his chest rumbled and he arched into her.

Yanking his shirt over his head, she tossed it aside, barely aware that it knocked over some of her books on her nightstand.

Rose reached for his belt, opening it with ease as he struggled to get her tee shirt off.

“Patience,” she teased, unzipping his fly.

Huffing, he signed, *“I’ve been patient.”*

Sitting up, Rose kissed an arc across his chest and abdomen and raked her nails down his sides.

His full body shudder only made her grin and do it again.

“And now you get your reward,” she said, batting her lashes up at him.

With lightning speed, she whipped her shirt off, followed by her bra.

Adam’s eager stare dropped to her breasts and pride bloomed behind her sternum.

“You’re so beautiful,” he signed, already reaching for her.

Her quip died on her tongue as he ducked, kissing her overheated, sensitive flesh.

As his lips wrapped around her left tip, she gasped and sank her hands into his hair, pulling out the elastic and freeing his long, black tresses.

"So are you," she breathed, raking her fingers through his hair and against his scalp.

Snaking his hands under her, he gripped the waistband of her jeans and yanked, practically tearing them off her body.

Rose couldn't help but laugh. "Not in the mood for a slow build up, huh?"

Lifting his head, he arched a dark brow incredulously.

"You're right, we've waited long enough."

Skimming his palms over her bare legs, up to the curve of her hips, he watched her like a devotee learning the most precious of worship rituals.

Rose swallowed. "Did… Do you need me to…" She faltered and tried again. "Is all of this new to you?"

Darkened eyes found hers, and the corner of his mouth lifted.

"If you're asking if I've had lovers," he signed. *"The answer is yes."*

She vehemently ignored the flash of jealousy singeing the edges of her mind.

"But you are new to me," he added, kissing the hollow of her throat. *"New and vibrant and sacred."* Adam kissed her chest again. *"You're the light that reaches the very depths of my soul. Show me how to make you even brighter."*

Lips parted on a quiet gasp, she jerked her chin in agreement and took his hand.

Guiding him between her thighs, she manipulated his fingers to do exactly what she needed, with the exact pressure and speed that had her arching her back.

“Adam,” she moaned, encircling his wrist as he took over.

He was a very quick study.

Leaning down over her, he pressed his face into her hair, breathing her in.

“I… I need…”

He nodded against her, kissing her temple as two digits slid inside her.

If she wasn’t so overwhelmed with pleasure, she would have cracked a smile. He knew what she needed, even when she didn’t have the voice to ask.

Adam sped up his movements, repeating every single thing that pushed her higher and higher until she was shaking beneath him.

Crying out, her release shot off like a firework, exploding into a million pinpricks of light against the night sky.

Gripping his shoulders, Rose held on for dear life as he stroked her through each powerful wave.

Even through the pounding of blood in her ears, she could hear his ragged breathing and it was almost enough to tip her over the edge once more, knowing he was this turned on by making her climax.

Easing his hand from her, Adam kissed her gently, bringing her back down to earth.

When she opened her eyes, she groaned at the sight of him sucking those same digits into his mouth and cleaning her essence off them.

“Fuck, that’s hot,” she rasped.

Grinning, Adam winked. *“It was even hotter feeling you fall.”*

Rose didn’t have it in her to banter. Not when he was right there, gorgeous and wild with his hair down and violet eyes gleaming with lust.

“I need you,” she said. “Now.”

A rumble in his chest was followed by him nosing along the hinge of her jaw.

“Now who’s impatient?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m a hypocrite. Could you please—”

He silenced her with a fiery kiss that stole her breath.

Rose felt more than saw him remove the rest of his clothing, and the mattress dipped as Adam knelt on the bed.

Wrapping an arm around her, he lifted her up until her head was cradled on the pillows.

“Do we need—” The last word was lost to her, as it wasn’t in ASL.

She frowned. “Need what?”

He tilted his head. *“Protection?”*

“Oh,” she said. “I’m on the pill.”

He blinked in surprise. *“One pill? That’s all it takes?”*

Rose giggled. “No, it’s… You know what, never mind. Just trust me, we’re fine.”

Smiling, he ducked down to kiss her again. *“I love it when you laugh with me like this.”*

“What do you mean?”

He trailed a finger between her bare breasts before signing, *“Even in the most intimate moments, you’re not afraid to laugh. You don’t fight your joy with me.”*

It was such a simple concept, but it struck her solidly in the chest.

He was right. They let humor and delight flow just as easily as pleasure.

“I guess that’s what happens when you love someone,” she said, cupping his face.

Adam's stare burned even brighter. *"I love you too. I loved you before and I love you now. And I'll love you ever after."*

With a soft smile, she tipped her head up and kissed him.

"Lay down on your back," she murmured between presses of their lips.

When he stared at her curiously, she grinned.

"You wanted me to claim you, right?" She pushed at his shoulder. "So let me."

Eyes widening, he did as she ordered, shuffling on top of the comforter until he was under her.

Christ, he was gorgeous. Broad shoulders and tapered waist, smooth skin and taut, corded muscles.

Everything about his physicality made sense now.

Of course he'd look like an athlete when he spent his whole life swimming underwater.

The strangeness of it all didn't outweigh Rose's desire for him.

Especially when she swung her leg over, straddling his hips and gripping his length with her right hand, stroking lightly.

Adam clenched his teeth, staring up at her with a mix of yearning and tension.

"Should I go slow?" She asked, swiping her thumb over his head. "Just in case you're—"

He shot up, gathering a handful of her hair and hauling her into a bruising, biting kiss.

Nipping her bottom lip, he soothed it with his tongue.

"Fuck me," he mouthed, holding her stare. *"Hard. Fast. Now."*

Flushing bright pink, Rose nodded.

For the first time since Isla had brutally returned his memories, she saw just a hint of Dexhart beneath the Adam she knew.

But it wasn't a hint she was disappointed to see.

Pushing him back onto the bed, she lined him up and sank down, taking him all the way to the base in one stroke.

The cords of his neck strained as he tossed his head back against the pillows, silently groaning.

Rose gasped at the intrusion but rocked her hips as she adjusted.

"Oh God," she breathed, planting her hands on his chest.

Adam palmed her hips, her thighs, her ass, holding her wherever he could.

Finding her perfect rhythm, she grinned down at him wickedly.

"I never thought I'd have a *prince* in my bed," she teased, flicking his nipple and raking her nails down the ridges of his abs. "Should I call you 'your highness' while I ride your cock?"

Adam's eyes flared wide milliseconds before they darkened, and he smirked. Lunging forward, he captured her left breast, wrapping his lips around her stiff peak and dragging his teeth over sensitive skin until she cried out and lost her pacing.

Heat pooled low in her belly as another release started to build.

Pinching her right nipple between his thumb and index finger, Adam pulled and twisted, making her gasp his name.

"Don't—Don't stop," she demanded, clutching the back of his head. "I'm—"

His pleased rumble vibrated through her, and her legs started to quake.

Staring up at her through his lashes, Adam watched her face with rapt attention as she chased her next high.

Back bowing, Rose's voice broke on a scream as she came so hard her vision dimmed.

Adam's arms banded around her, flipping them both until she was under him.

His silent question was written all over his face— 'is this okay?'

Nodding, she smiled weakly and wrapped her legs around his waist, pinning him close to her.

Propped up on his forearms, he moved just like the ocean against the shore. Rhythmic, exhilarating, powerful thrusts only doubled, tripled Rose's release, pushing her higher and dragging her under in waves of unrelenting pleasure.

Her throat was raw, her skin fevered and tight across her bones, every muscle in her body begging for simultaneous reprieve and continuation.

Sweat dampened Adam's neck and Rose licked away his salt, moaning praise in his ear.

Kissing her until she couldn't breathe, Adam held her face as he broke away to stare into her eyes.

"One more," he mouthed. *"With me."*

Rose sucked in a ragged gulp of air and choked out her agreement.

Pistoning his hips, he drove her towards the next pinnacle of ecstasy.

Gouging his back with her nails, she arched under him and screamed his name.

Not Dexhart, but Adam.

And *Adam* tumbled over the edge right along with her, dropping his face to the crook of her neck as his chest heaved.

Running her hands down his triceps and sides in soothing strokes, Rose kissed the shell of his ear.

“Mine,” she whispered. “You’re mine, Adam.”

He kissed the freckle above her collarbone and looked up at her.

Smiling softly, he mouthed, *“And you’re mine, Rose,”* before pressing his forehead to hers.

She’d never felt anything so right in her life.

He was hers, and she was his, and nothing could take that from them.

Not even magic.

Chapter Twenty-One

Dexhart,

I’m not sure why you insisted upon maintaining your ruse when I came here tonight. I hope that your motives are because of the humans you’ve befriended and not due to any lingering anger towards me. It would break my heart to think you’ve lumped me in with mother, though I can see how you would take my silence in the moment as agreement with her statements.

I know if you come home we can convince mother her ideas of military advancement upon the humans who hunt our waters is not the legacy she wishes to leave. But I can’t do it alone. We both know you’re her favorite, even if she shows it in the worst ways.

I wish father was here. He always knew the right thing to say, the right move to make.

I’m swimming in circles without you, brother. Please come back.

If not for me, for the humans who don’t deserve her attacks.

Stay safe and keep your gaze to the east. The sun will always rise again.

- Odette

Adam reread the letter written on the cloth napkin for the twelfth time.

He regretted how much pain his absence caused his sister and regretted even more that she thought he’d been pretending not to know her when she’d come to the Whittaker looking for him.

Regaining his memories had felt like being shoved into icy cold sunlight—jarring, panic inducing, and so illuminating it hurt.

The inky void in his mind had split apart and receded like octopus tentacles, leaving him with only knowledge.

Too much knowledge.

He couldn't believe it, but he longed for his previous ignorance.

If he had stayed Adam the amnesiac, he'd never have understood what was happening to him when Isla's spell started to wear off and he grew sickly and weak. He'd have been scared, maybe even a little hopeful that the kind human doctors he'd encountered before could help him, but he'd have carried on. He'd have spent his days with Rose and soaked up every ounce of her presence, just happy to be with her.

He wouldn't have to carry the dread now weighing down his shoulders.

Isla might be able to change her spell work and give him the option of staying, but he knew his mother would still come for him. If he defied her, she'd batter the coastline with storm after storm, until all of East Cove was turned to rubble.

Rose's inn wouldn't survive. Her family's home wouldn't survive.

The townspeople…

If they evacuated, they'd have a chance. But if they stayed, thinking they could weather each one…

He swallowed roughly and pinched his eyes shut.

He had to go back to his mother's court. Back to the ocean and his true form.

He had to become Dexhart again.

The name didn't fit him correctly anymore, like a piece of clothing tailored for someone else.

Sure, he had Dexhart's memories. His knowledge of Merfolk and the ways of the waters. He had his understanding of politics and leadership and the magic of his people.

But being granted legs hadn’t just given him the chance to live on land, it had given him freedom.

The moment he’d washed up on shore, he’d been cut loose from his burdens, and no one here was demanding he anchor himself back to them.

Rose wanted nothing for him but happiness and ease.

Leaning back in his chair, he smiled softly at the latest drawing of her propped up on his desk.

This one would be just for him—a detailed sketch of her in the throes of passion, her head tipped back and hair fanned out on her comforter, lips parted in a moan.

He could practically hear her gasping his name just by staring at the paper.

Rose never called him Dexhart, and he never wanted her to.

She only ever called him Adam.

And Adam was the name falling from her lips in this scene, as he’d moved within her.

He shifted in his seat, painfully aware of his stirring body.

They’d come together several times last night, and then several more that morning before Rose needed to get ready for work, and yet he still wanted more.

Needed more.

Learning every nuance of bringing her pleasure had flooded him with pride.

He couldn’t explain it, but being a good lover for her was a driving force, motivating his entire being. Perhaps it was because it was the physical representation of his love for her, but it felt like a good omen that their time together between Rose’s sheets was just as thrilling and affirming and warm as their time with their clothes on.

His friends would call him a rake or Rose his personal rip tide—the person who could drag you out to the depths and ruin you in all ways possible.

But Adam knew better.

Rose wasn't the dangerous current drawing him away from all he held dear.

She was his home. His heart. The refracted edge of his soul.

He couldn't imagine a single breath without her.

And now, he had to face the very real possibility of losing her—either by his mother's hand or his aunt's.

Narrowing his stare on the stacks of art and stationary supplies, Adam sat up straighter.

If his memories could be wiped again, he needed to give himself a head start in recovering them. In recovering his time with Rose.

Picking up a pen and pad of paper, he dated the top and started writing.

He'd tell himself their story.

Again and again and again.

* * * * * * *

Sipping her coffee, Rose leaned against the counter, as Everly and her new sous-chef Beau worked to prep for the weekend brunch crowd.

"Oh, dice that a little finer, would you sweetie?" Everly said, gesturing to the onion on Beau's cutting board.

He smiled and nodded. "Yes, chef."

Glancing up from her phone, Rose hid her smirk.

Beau was a pleasant addition to the Whittaker kitchen staff, though it would take a while to get used to his intense professionalism.

Clean cut, with short reddish-brown hair and bright green eyes, he was as handsome as he was polite.

And he was so very obviously smitten with Everly.

Not that Rose was going to tell her, given she had enough on her plate, so to speak.

Catching her eye, Everly gave her a ‘oh god, what the fuck?’ look over Beau’s shoulder.

But it had nothing to do with him.

Isla had left the day before to attempt to retrieve some of her spell ingredients and find some substitutes that wouldn’t cause Adam’s brain to get wiped clean like a dry erase board, and from the moment the Merfolk sea witch had strode out the door, Everly had barely held herself together.

“Chef, I’m not so sure about this parsley,” Beau mused, picking at the leafy green herb in the dish in front of him. “I can go pick more from our plant out back.”

“Okay great, thanks,” Everly said over the sizzling pans on her stove.

As soon as the back door closed, she whirled. “How are you not freaking out right now?”

Sliding her phone into her pocket, Rose’s head hung limp from her neck. “I don’t know. I had, like, four mental break downs in the shower this morning. And last night I panicked and took down all the art of fishing boats and that damned stuffed swordfish and shoved it all into the hall closet ‘cause I thought it would be offensive to him now.”

“Has anything else happened?” Everly asked, circling around the prep island.

“Are you asking if more of his family showed up or if he suddenly sprouted fins?”

“I meant if he had a personality shift or something,” Everly said, slightly aghast. “You don’t think he’s randomly going to grow fins do you?”

“I don’t know, Ev. I’ve never dated a *merman* before.”

“You’re right, you’re right,” Everly said, holding her hands up. “This is just all so—”

The kitchen door swung open and both women went silent, expecting to see Beau.

Instead, Adam waved, pulling up short when he saw their expressions.

After a beat of awkward silence, his shoulders slumped.

“You were talking about me, weren’t you?”

Rose nodded, chugging her coffee. “Yep.”

At least he appreciated her honesty.

Looking to Everly, he signed, *“Would you like to ask me questions?”*

“Oh my God, yes,” she exclaimed, rushing forward. “Okay, firstly, if all Merpeople are magical, does that mean you could, in theory, teach me about magic too? Secondly, is your aunt coming back soon? Thirdly, can I contact her about some of my other questions myself or is human to Mer-person communication super difficult?”

Adam blinked. *“Those… aren’t the questions I thought you’d ask.”*

“We’ll get to the ones about you in a second,” Everly said, waving a hand out.

Stepping forward, he signed, *“Well, all Merfolk are magical but I’m not skilled in much when it comes to spell work and casting. My aunt or my mother would know more, though I doubt my mother would be the best tutor.”*

He shot a glance at Rose, and she snorted a laugh.

“I’m pretty average when it comes to Merfolk magic.”

“I wouldn’t call you average,” Rose commented.

Adam grinned, moving closer to her. *“That’s just because you love me.”*

“So average where you’re from means healing people’s wounds and controlling people’s emotions?” Everly asked.

Adam frowned. *“I admit I must’ve healed Rose’s cut, even though I didn’t do it consciously, but I can’t control people’s emotions. Merfolk are alluring to humans, but we can’t make them feel anything that isn’t already there.”*

Everly’s stare widened. “But that day with everyone fighting in the inn… You helped make the food.”

“I might’ve made their food, but I didn’t make them fight,” Adam signed. *“I don’t have that kind of power.”*

“Then who does?” Everly asked, voice raising an octave. Glancing between Rose and Adam, she repeated, “Who does?”

“Don’t look at me,” Rose said, pouring herself more coffee. “The only power I have is to get really great Trip Advisor reviews from tourists.”

Everly gestured to him in a flurry of hand motions. “Contact your aunt. I need to talk to her right now.”

“I’ll have to go to the ocean and—”

“Then do it, Adam,” Everly demanded, looking stricken. “Can’t you see I’m freaking out here?”

“I think the International Space Station can see it, Ev,” Rose said.

The door swung open, and Derek’s heavy work boots echoed on the kitchen tile.

“Okay, I got your text,” he said, hoisting his toolbox onto the counter. “Which windowsill is busted from the storm?”

When no one spoke, he turned, searching all of their faces.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Everly said with a strained, pitchy voice.

Derek lifted his brows. "Ooookay."

As Everly went back to chopping vegetables, Rose sipped her coffee and subtly handed Adam a double chocolate muffin when her brother wasn't looking.

"Hey, what happened to the swordfish over your mantle?" Derek asked as he popped open his toolbox.

Rose eyed him. "What are you talking about?"

"The mounted swordfish. It's gone."

Schooling her expression, she shook her head slowly. "What swordfish?"

Derek faltered, looking over his shoulder and then back at her. "The —the swordfish that's been over your fireplace since the day you opened."

"I think you're overworking yourself, Der," Rose said over the lip of her cup. "There's never been a swordfish over the fireplace."

"Yes, there was. I…" He trailed off, mouth hanging open and twisted to look at Everly, Adam, and then back to his sister. "Oh, okay. Ha ha, very funny."

Pushing away from the counter, Rose tapped Adam's arm to have him follow her before saying, "Keep an eye on him, Everly. I think Derek's starting to lose it."

As the door swung shut behind them, she heard her brother yell something about being gaslit and she laughed.

Adam glanced down at her. *"What did you do with the swordfish?"*

"Stuck it in the hall closet," she admitted sheepishly. "It seemed… rude to keep it up."

Smiling softly, he leaned down and kissed her fully.

“You’re very kind,” he signed.

She just hoped his mother could be convinced of that trait.

* * * * * * *

Stepping into the surf, Adam relished the feeling of the ocean lapping at his bare feet.

The weather was warm for April, but the water was still ice cold.

Not that he minded. He was born in the Atlantic. His entire being was perfectly suited for frigid, briny water.

No wonder everyone was so confused as to why I wasn’t hypothermic when I washed up, he thought with a wry grin. *It’s physically impossible for me.*

Bits of memory from his first few weeks on land flashed across his mind’s eye.

This was how his sister had found him, and then his mother and aunt.

Water was a conduit, transmitting the energy of all things dwelling within.

When he’d gone for a walk with Rose and Zoey, and let the waves rush over his feet, it had been a whale song to his pod. His energy traveled through the water, alerting all Merfolk to his location.

And as he stood in the lapping waves now, he felt his people deep inside their ocean cave homes.

Some were content and happy, some yearning and sorrowful, and others…

Absolutely rageful.

Mother, he thought with a sigh.

Ignoring the spike of energy aimed right for him, Adam focused on seeking out Isla.

Extending his aura, he closed his eyes.

Aunt Isla, I know you're busy, he thought. *But Everly is panicked about her possible magical heritage. If you could, I think she would appreciate—*

"Dexhart."

He jerked, eyes flying open as he spun around.

His mother stood ankle deep in the waves, her human clothing partially soaked from where she'd emerged.

The white skirts clung to her legs and bobbed as the water flowed in and then receded.

"You have nothing to say to me now?" Mira asked, her black hair fluttering around her shoulders with the breeze. "You've regained your memories and yet you still stay away."

Using their own sign language, Adam said, *"Everything I wish to say will only anger you. And I'd rather not risk another storm."*

"Do not mock my grief," she snapped.

"What grief? I'm right here," he signed and then gestured to himself. *"I'm alive and cared for."*

She turned her nose up and stared past his left shoulder.

"You hate them that much that you cannot even find a little appreciation for the kindness they shared with your only son?"

Her bright blue eyes blazed. "They only showed you such kindness because they thought you were one of them," she said, lip curling. "Had you washed up on shore in your true form, your human female would have left you to die."

Rage churned in his core, heating his blood and setting his teeth on edge.

“No, she wouldn’t have,” he signed, barely maintaining his composure. *“You don’t know Rose. You don’t know her heart. She’s good and compassionate and brave—”*

“Absurd.”

“And she loves me,” he continued, refusing to be interrupted. *“She still loves me even after finding out who and what I am. She wants a future with me.”*

Mira’s glare sharpened into the serrated point of a shark’s tooth.

“You will have no such thing.”

He’d known she’d fight him, but the confirmation still cut him deeper than any spear wound.

“I went to Isla for a reason,” he signed. *“Not to abandon you, but to prove to our people that not all humans are a threat to us. There are good people here, just like there are difficult ones. Everyone is flawed, but every single person here is trying their best.”*

“That is only the façade they show you,” his mother said, keeping her back pin straight.

Adam stepped forward. *“No, it’s not. I’ve witnessed their messiness, their failings, their selfishness. But I’ve also witnessed their humility, and patience, and capacity for love.”* His stare turned pleading. *“If you advance on them—using our minimal able bodied population—you will not only be risking your people, but you won’t even be attacking the cause of the devastation to our home waters.”*

A flicker of interest in strategy crossed her stare and he knew he could keep her hooked if he approached his next words with care.

“The fishermen hauling in the nets are not the villains,” he signed. *“The false narrative that people need more, and more, and more from already depleted resources is the real enemy.”*

“And how do you suggest we battle a *concept*,” she sneered.

Adam held her gaze. *“By guiding their hand instead of chopping it off.”*

When she didn’t respond, he took his chance.

“What if…” He strode two paces closer. *“Instead of attacking their vessels, we simply cut their nets. Ruin their traps. Disable their sonar and navigation systems. We don’t need to wage war to gain a strong advantage. And more importantly, we don’t have to risk any of our people to do it.”*

His mother was quiet as she considered his proposal.

“If you’re this committed to your new plan,” she started finally. “Then you’ll be the one to lead and execute it.”

Adam’s stomach twisted. *“No, I won’t.”*

And just like that, the tentative peace between them crumbled.

“I am tired of this insolence, Dexhart,” she shouted, cutting her hand through the air. “You’ve had your fun, you’ve dallied with your human female, and now you must return to your real home, to the people who truly love you.”

*“Rose **does** truly love me,”* he signed, knowing the anger simmering beneath his skin was starting to show. *“And I will not abandon her.”*

“No, but you will abandon your people. Your family.”

Adam’s jaw clenched. *“There’s nothing that says I cannot be a part of both worlds.”*

Mira scoffed, blue eyes going cold. “You are even more foolish than your sister.”

“Please, mother,” he signed, keeping his movements measured. *“I have never asked you for anything. Give me the ability to stay on land. I know you can—”*

Rushing forward, she jabbed her finger in his face. “I would rather die than mutilate my own flesh and blood like that.”

“It doesn’t have to be permanent,” he argued. *“I could come back every three months. Or every full moon, every week, every sunset—I don’t care. Whatever you want, just don’t force me to leave the woman I love. Don’t steal my memories from me again and again.”*

Confusion flickered in her furious stare. “Steal your memories?”

“Isla’s spell,” he signed, sighing deeply. *“It was an accident that it wiped my mind, but she isn’t sure she can change it so that it won’t do the same thing if cast again.”*

Mira reared back, gaping at him.

“She’s trying,” he continued. *“But if she does the spell incorrectly again, I’ll lose my memories once more. I’ll be back to where I was the last time—a mute amnesiac who’s alone and scared and who doesn’t even know he’s a Merman.”*

“You… You would go through all of that for this human?” She asked, barely above a whisper.

Steeling himself, he nodded. *“I would rather spend the rest of my life forgetting and remembering Rose every few months, than never knowing her at all.”*

His mother searched his face for any hint of deception.

She found none, and that only angered her more.

Cursing under her breath, she turned away from him and paced the beach for several moments.

Returning to him, she said, “You are your father’s son.”

Adam puffed out his chest even though he knew she meant it as an insult.

His father was an eternal optimist, convinced of the kindness in all people.

He had trusted the good will of everyone, even until the day a ship's rotor struck and killed him while he tried to save a human who'd fallen overboard.

Adam could only imagine what his mother thought about him echoing his father's last actions by saving that child from drowning.

"Please, mother," he signed.

Mira waved him off. "No. I will not enable my son to be caught and skinned by the humans you've vouched for."

She strode into the water, barely slowing as the waves lapped at her shins, then her knees, and then up to her hips.

"You'll have the four weeks left of Isla's spell," she called back to him. "But no more. After that, you return to your home waters, and you will not set foot on land again."

Bitterness tainted his vision, soured his mouth, and turned his heart to stone.

"And if I don't come back at all?" He signed when she glanced up.

His mother's expression iced over.

"Then you will die in the arms of the woman you say you love so much."

In a gentle undulation of light beneath the waves, his mother's legs transformed back into her glorious teal and white tail, and her torso morphed back into the true form of the Merfolk.

Scales, webbed hands and long, dark claws tipping each finger, and gills on either side of her neck.

And with one graceful flip, she disappeared into the sea, leaving Adam alone on the beach once more.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Enveloped in heat, Rose awoke to gentle kisses trailing down her bare shoulder.

Smiling into her pillow, she shuffled her feet, tangling her legs with Adam's.

"Mmm, good morning," she murmured, not yet ready to open her eyes.

He wasn't deterred, of course.

With one arm banded around her waist, Adam pressed her tight against his chest as he mouthed at her throat.

The faintest edge of teeth grazing the hinge of her jaw made her roll her hips back into him.

"Someone woke up feeling greedy," she teased.

Adam nodded against her before nosing into her hair and kissing the shell of her ear.

Immediately her body readied for him, need spiking in her core.

Rose was convinced she'd had more sex in the last three days than she'd had in three *years.*

Not that she was complaining, of course.

Her early morning runs had been replaced by a different kind of cardio. The kind that made her muscles languid and skin flushed and glowy.

It was a good thing they'd spent each night in her cottage. The inn didn't have very good sound proofing.

She marveled at how different she felt—like she'd shed the old version of herself.

Two months ago she kept her heart so strongly guarded even her closest friend had difficulty reaching her at times.

But now, those walls she'd put up were cracked and crumbling, hardly even walls at all.

She'd lost some of her armor, and it was terrifying at times to know just how exposed she was, but the tradeoff was that her soft spots were cherished by the man currently holding her like she was the most precious treasure in the world.

Adam kissed the corner of her mouth, smiling against her, before moving down the bed.

Confusion flickered through the haze of sleep and building desire.

"What are you—" Rose was cut off by strong hands gripping her hips and rolling her onto her back. "Oh!"

Before she could question him further, Adam draped both of her thighs over his shoulders and settled between them.

The first press of his lips to her sensitive core had her spearing her hands into his hair, holding on for dear life.

A pleased rumble traveled up his chest to where his mouth was on her, and Rose whimpered.

"Adam," she breathed, and his fingertips dug into her thighs, silently urging her to open for him.

Little did he know, she was already split wide and left vulnerable for him and him alone.

Glancing up at her through his dark lashes, Adam's ocean-violet eyes burned with so much love, it made Rose's own eyes prick with tears.

Whatever happened, no matter how much or how little time they had, she knew in her bone marrow that they were eternally connected. A constellation of stars in a shape only they could recognize.

As Adam flattened his tongue against her, Rose gasped and arched her back.

Yep, this was definitely better than running.

* * * * * * *

“Where do these go?” Zoey asked, holding up a stack of receipts.

Gesturing with the end of her pen, Rose said, “Top drawer, first file.”

“And these?” She waved several invoices in front of her face.

“Middle drawer, on top of the ones already in there.”

“And—”

Rose jerked her head up. “Zo, I’m trying to finish payroll. Can you please—”

“Fine, fine,” Zoey sighed. “I’ll just figure it out. But don’t blame me if your filing system is all messed up later.”

“Thank you so very much.”

Sipping her coffee, she focused to insure her handwriting was as neat as possible, filling in each line and signing the checks at the bottom.

“You and Adam are coming to dinner, right?”

“Despite my better judgement, yes,” Rose muttered, flipping to the next page.

She wasn’t exactly avoiding her family, but she definitely wasn’t making an effort to see them either.

Not for any fault of theirs—shockingly—but because she just didn’t know what to do or say around them now.

Did she tell them the truth? Did she explain that Adam had regained his memories? That he was an honest to God Merman?

That last one would either get her committed or everyone would start shouting about how they knew they’d been right all along, and both options were just as equally frustrating for her.

And if anyone was going to notice a change in Adam, it would be Zoey.

Which was exactly why Rose had kept her little sister up at the front desk with her while Adam worked in the kitchen with Everly and Beau.

They needed a game plan.

If Isla could change the spell, Adam would still need to go back to the ocean and be in his true form for at least a week. It would be difficult to justify his absence but not impossible, especially if Rose just evaded the hell out of her family until he got back.

If Isla's spell couldn't be changed, or worse, stole his memories again, they'd have no choice but to tell her family, if only to explain why he was back to forgetting how utensils worked and how to button his own shirts.

And if Adam couldn't come back at all…

A knot formed in Rose's throat so quickly, it closed off her airway.

She couldn't think about that option.

It was heartbreaking enough to know it was still a possibility, if she tried to brace for it's impact, she'd stop being able to function.

No, she had to believe in their future together.

"Rose?"

Blinking, she glanced up. "Huh?"

"I asked if you'd come with me to take pictures after this is done," Zoey said, still holding a stack of receipts in her right hand.

"I thought you already had enough pictures for your showcase," she said.

Zoey nodded, dropping the papers into a drawer—the wrong one, it looked like—and faced her fully. "I do, but I want to take a few more for this collage piece I'm working on."

Rose checked the time. “When is Derek coming by?”

“I don’t know, six? He said he’d text me when he was on his way.”

Making a thoughtful noise, Rose said, “If Lex comes in early, I can go with you. But otherwise—”

Zoey’s gaze shifted over her shoulder and a wide smile broke across her face.

“Adam can come with me,” she exclaimed.

Crap.

Turning, Rose caught his enthusiastic wave and beaming grin complete with the dimple in his left cheek that she adored.

Regaining his memories hadn’t changed a single thing about how he interacted with her sister, and for that she fell even more in love with him.

But Zoey was too good at snooping for her own good, and if she caught wind of even a subtle change in Adam…

“Go with you where?” He signed, coming to stand next to Rose.

“I need more photos for a collage,” Zoey explained quickly. I brought my camera and my new SD card. What do you say? You want to be a model again?”

“Adam’s not your personal Ken doll you can move around and pose however you want,” Rose told her, planting her hand on her hip.

Zoey rolled her eyes. “Well, duh. He’s cuter than a Ken doll.”

“Zo.”

Adam gently touched Rose’s low back and smiled at her.

“I don’t mind,” he signed. *“I’d love to go.”*

“Great, I’m just going to run to the bathroom first,” Zoey said, already rushing off to the restroom.

When she was out of earshot, Rose sighed. “Do you think that’s a good idea?”

“I think waiting to use the bathroom is a gamble no one wants to take.”

Laughing, she poked him in the ribs. “I meant hanging out alone with Zoey. What if she senses something’s up with you?”

Tilting his head, Adam tucked a stray lock of black hair behind his ear. *“I guess… I could tell her the truth.”*

“Really?”

He nodded. *“I don’t see why not. I’ll have to tell her eventually, right?”*

The word ‘eventually’ held a little extra weight as he signed, and images flashed in her mind in rapid succession.

Holidays together. Birthdays. Family cook outs and trips. Graduations, retirements, wins and losses.

Maybe even children.

The people close to them would find out at some point that Adam wasn’t your average human.

Rose wondered how long it would take her mother to ask if Merfolk recipes were better than hers.

Ducking to catch her eye, Adam lifted a questioning brow.

“Sorry, I just got lost in my own thoughts,” she said, shaking her head.

Smiling softly, he kissed her forehead before signing, *“I wish I could read your mind. I’d love to get lost in there with you.”*

Despite the warmth suffusing her limbs, she chuckled. “Trust me, it’s a mess up there. Just endless to-do lists and mortifying memories of junior high.”

“Okay, I’m ready,” Zoey called, running back from the bathroom and grabbing her bag. “If we go out past Mussel Point, I bet I can get some

cool shots of the town skyline with the water."

"Just be careful of the tide coming in," Rose said as Adam grabbed his denim jacket. "And of cars. And drunk tourists. And those stupid electric scooters."

"Okay, *mom*," Zoey teased, already heading for the door.

"I'll keep an eye on her," Adam signed, leaning in to kiss Rose. *"I promise."*

"Thank you," she murmured, kissing him once more. "You have your phone right?"

He nodded, circling the desk. *"We'll be back in time for dinner."*

As Zoey ran out the Whittaker's front door, he looked back.

"I love you."

Rose signed the words back to him, smiling to herself as she returned to the monotony of payroll.

* * * * * * *

None of Rose's texts were being answered.

It was almost six and Derek had already arrived to pick up Zoey, deciding to wait on her in the kitchen.

She'd texted her sister multiple times, but honestly wasn't that shocked when she didn't even read them.

What made her stomach twist into painful knots was the fact that Adam wasn't replying either.

Rose: Hey, just checking in. Derek's here but he can wait a while – he's been given a project to keep him busy.

Rose: Are you guys on your way back?

Rose: Where are you? Do you need a ride?

Rose: Adam?? Is everything okay? I'm getting worried.

No response. No read marker at the bottom of the thread.

She tried to calm herself down by imagining a very mundane, rational explanation for his lack of communication.

Maybe he couldn't hear the notification sound. Maybe he'd dropped his phone in the water. Maybe they were in a dead zone for cell service.

With her thumbs hovering over her phone's keyboard, Rose chewed her lip until it ached.

Did she call her dad? Grampy? Jimmy down at the station?

Before she could even open her contacts, the door to the Whittaker flung open with a bang, and she dropped her phone.

Stumbling in, battered and filthy and soaked, Adam hoisted Zoey's limp body in his arms.

"Oh my God," Rose cried, running to them. "Zoey? What happened?"

Rushing to the sofa, Adam lowered her to the cushions and dropped to his knees.

"Adam?" Rose gripped his shoulder. "What happened?" She repeated.

Blood matted her sister's hair and stained Adam's shirt and jacket.

Leaning over Zoey, Rose tried to check her pulse.

She was so, so cold…

"She—She hit her head," Adam signed with violently shaking hands. *"She climbed up on a rock too fast and lost her footing. I reached for her—I almost had her but she fell and…"*

Adam slumped to the side, pulling his knee up as he trembled.

Tears rolled down his face, leaving wet tracks through the streaks of mud on his cheeks.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

With one hand still on his arm, Rose reached for her sister. “Zoey? Can you hear me?”

Heavy footfalls jogged up behind them and Derek nearly tripped over them to get to her.

“Zo? Hey, c’mon kid, wake up,” he ordered, hands cupping her pale face. “Don’t do this, okay, c’mon.”

It took all her strength not to let the panic take over.

Everly’s voice above them said, “The ambulance is on the way.”

The worried, growing crowd became nothing but white noise around them.

Derek gently shook Zoey’s shoulders. “Kiddo, you gotta wake up, alright?”

“Here,” a voice said, offering several clean towels to them.

Looking up, Rose saw it was Beau.

“Thank you,” she breathed, taking the material and holding it to Zoey’s head.

Yanking his coat off, Derek draped it over her, still muttering encouragements to open her eyes, to wake up, to stay with them.

Adam’s hollow, haunted stare never left Zoey’s face.

Not even when the EMTs arrived and loaded her onto a gurney.

But still she didn’t wake.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Pacing along the white sterile tile, Rose chewed her thumbnail until it bled and kept chewing.

The beeping of various monitors from other rooms grated her fried nerves.

As soon as they'd gotten to the hospital, Zoey had been whisked away to emergency surgery and no one had come to talk to them yet.

All she remembered from the triage nurse was 'skull fracture' and 'severe concussion.'

The rest had been a blur of pale blue scrubs, forms she couldn't legally sign as she wasn't Zoey's guardian, and phone calls from Derek and Everly telling her they were picking up her mom and dad and bringing them.

Doubling back along the length of the waiting room for the eighteenth time, something caught Rose's attention.

"Oh God, Adam, you're bleeding," she gasped, seeing the small pool of red forming beneath his boot and the massive tear in his jeans.

He blinked as if unaware of his injury. *"I didn't feel it."*

Grabbing a box of off-brand tissues from the nearby coffee table, she knelt in front of him.

"This looks bad," she murmured, pressed a few to the ragged wound in his shin. "You might need stitches."

Adam didn't even flinch as she tended to him.

"I'm going to go get a nurse," Rose said, pushing to her feet.

An ice cold hand wrapped around her wrist, halting her.

"I'm sorry," Adam signed, staring up at her with glassy eyes. *"I broke my promise. I should have been closer, should have told her not to climb that high. I didn't do my job—"*

Rose cupped his face, holding his gaze. “Hey, listen to me. This was not your fault. It was an accident, Adam. It could have happened with any of us.”

“You trusted me,” he signed. *“You trusted me to look after her, and I failed.”*

Swiping her thumbs along his cheeks, she tried to wipe away some of the muck and sorrow.

“You did not fail, Adam. You were there to help her,” she murmured. “If you hadn’t gone with Zoey, she’d have been out there on her own and God knows what could have happened if…” She trailed off, swallowing thickly. “You can’t blame yourself for something you had no control over.”

After a moment, he pulled out of her hold.

“I almost had her,” he signed. *“I was so close to grabbing her arm, but she was just out of reach and—"*

The hydraulic hissing of the emergency doors made them both jerk and glance up to see her mom and dad running in, trailed closely by Derek and Everly.

“Where is she?” Her mom called.

At the same time, her dad said, “Have the doctors come out yet?”

Rose shook her head. “She’s still in surgery. I haven’t talked to anyone yet.”

With fierce determination, her mom said, “I’m going to find out what’s happening,” as she rushed to the intake desk.

Crowding into the small corner of the waiting room, her dad exhaled roughly. His blue eyes were watery as his gaze found Adam.

Stepping in front of him, he towered over the other man.

“Adam…”

He flinched at his name, and Rose's heart shattered.

Dropping a hand to his shoulder, her dad leaned down. "Thank you," he said, voice rough. "Thank you for helping our little girl."

Adam only stared, barely dipping his chin in acknowledgement before her dad released him and went off to find her mom.

"Hey, sweetie," Everly said, hugging Rose tightly. "What can we do?"

With her arms still wrapped around her best friend, she said, "Nothing. We just have to wait."

Derek nudged her. "I'm going to go get everyone coffee and something to eat."

"I don't know if the cafeteria is open," she said, pulling back from Everly.

"Don't worry, I find the vending machines."

Squeezing her hand, Everly said, "I'll go with him. Make sure he doesn't get lost or decide to beat up a coke machine."

Thanking them, Rose flashed a tight smile and watched as they disappeared around the corner.

Turning back to Adam, her face fell.

Staring off into the distance, with his hands clasped together in front of him, fresh tears spilled from his lashes.

And the wound in his leg had healed.

* * * * * * *

Adam had refused to leave the hospital.

Rose's parents told him he didn't need to stay, that they would update them as soon as there was news, but the thought of going further than several yards from the hospital was like spurs in his gills.

He couldn't go.

And Rose hadn’t fought him on it, which told him just how worried she was as well.

Zoey’s surgery had been long and complex. He didn’t understand a lot of the terminology used by the surgeon who’d come out to talk to the family, but he knew what a skull fracture was.

Knew what brain swelling meant.

And he’d deduced that a medically induced coma was not the best outcome for her recover, but certainly not the worst.

Still, all the doctors could offer now was that they’d have to wait.

Zoey was healthy and young—two factors that would work in her favor—but her injury had been severe.

I should have been closer to her, he thought, staring at the tiled flooring. *I shouldn’t have let her go out so far. What was I thinking? How could I have been so indifferent about Zoey’s life? How arrogant was I?*

Tapping his knee, Rose offered him half of a bagel from the hospital cafeteria. “Here, babe,” she murmured. “You haven’t had anything all day.”

He shook his head. *“I’m not hungry.”*

She traded the bagel for a bottle of water. “Then have this.”

Again, he declined.

“Please, Adam,” she said, voice frayed. “Don’t make me worry about you too.”

His stare lifted, and the concern in her blue eyes made his heart trip.

Finally, he relented and took the water.

“Thank you,” she said with a barely-there smile.

Adam hated hearing those words. He didn’t deserve gratitude in any capacity.

He’d failed. He’d made a promise to Rose, and he’d failed, and no matter how many times she argued the counterpoint, he knew he was at

fault.

Sipping from the plastic opening, he watched the double doors that led to the ICU.

Her parents said they could go in to see Zoey in the morning—something about hospital policy and the number of people in one room at a time.

Adam drained the water bottle and screwed the cap back on.

“I can take it,” Rose said, nudging his arm.

But he shook his head and stood up. *“It’s okay. I should stretch my legs.”*

Gathering several other items of trash left by Derek and Everly who were now dozing off in the stiff plastic chairs behind them, Adam wandered to a distant garbage can.

He didn’t return to the waiting room though. Instead, he let his feet take him around the corner to one of the main corridors.

Art hung on the walls—mostly portraits of men and women he didn’t recognize, but occasionally there was a print of a landscape or building.

One at the far end caught his eye though.

It an oil painting of East Cove’s harbor. The same place the boat parade had been held.

The same place Adam had dove in to save a drowning boy.

Remembering that day felt odd—like staring through two overlapping windows to watch a scene unfold.

At the time, he’d had no idea of his real identity. He was still *just* Adam.

And yet, despite not even having proof that he could swim himself, he’d gone after the boy who’d fallen off the boat. Instinct was all that

propelled him forward, forward, forward until he was leaping off the dock and into the frigid water.

He'd been able to help and so he did.

It wasn't until afterward that he realized he could have gotten hurt or worse.

Remembering that day with his memories as Dexhart offered him another perspective.

You are your father's son.

His father had been a gentle, courageous soul. For a king, he had no hubris, no ego to speak of. He only cared about the safety and livelihoods of his people.

Of *all* people.

Mira had barely tolerated her husband's restless patrolling, but he'd proven time and again how necessary it was.

They'd all lost count of how many lost scuba divers, swimmers, even small fishing boats had been saved by his father.

Aleksi had lived well and died doing exactly what he believed he should do—helping those in dire need.

His death had devastated Mira, and her grief consumed her. It turned her against all humans.

It wasn't what Aleksi would have wanted.

Staring at the oil painting of East Cove harbor, Adam swore he could feel his father's spirit next to him.

Dexhart, he'd once said. *Humans may have stopped believing in Merfolk, but we should never stop believing in humans.*

His chest constricted.

Adam was his father's son. And because of that, he knew what he had to do.

Pulling his phone from his pocket, he typed as he walked to the nurses station, avoiding any eyeline from the waiting room down the hall.

Approaching a petite blonde woman in pink scrubs, he flashed a charming smile perfected by his past as Dexhart.

“Hi, can I help you?” The nurse asked.

Turning his phone screen towards her, he waited as she read his message.

Hello, I normally communicate with ASL, but I know not everyone is fluent, so I thought a note would work best. I’m Mayor McCleary’s son-in-law and he asked me to bring him his nightly medicine. Would it be alright if I quickly dropped it off with him?

On cue, the nurse glanced up only to see Adam holding a few tablets in his palm.

She didn’t need to know they were breath mints and an antacid he’d found in his pocket.

“Oh, of course,” she nodded. “I wasn’t aware Mayor McCleary’s daughter was married.”

Flipping his phone back around, Adam typed out another message and showed it to her.

It’s recent. We decided to have a quiet ceremony with just family.

The nurse placed a hand over her heart. “Aww, how romantic. Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” he signed, hoping she at least knew that much.

Pointing down the hall, she said, “Room Four-Eleven, on the left.”

Adam smiled and thanked her again, quickly shoving his phone back into his jacket.

His long legs came in use yet again as he ate up the distance to Zoey’s recovery room.

As quietly as possible, he opened the door and stuck his head in.

Rose's parents were slumped shoulder to shoulder, sleeping upright in two identical plastic chairs. He listened to their breathing for a moment, making sure they wouldn't stir from the sound of his footsteps as he entered.

Sharp, metallic beeping and the slow whooshing of a ventilator filled the air.

Adam's chest ached even more as his gaze fell to the figure laid prone in the small hospital bed.

He knew how uncomfortable those beds were. How itchy and stiff the bedding was.

Zoey didn't need to spend any more time in this sterile, frightening place.

Keeping to the shadowed side of the room, Adam went to her side and knelt by her head.

The magic keeping him on land was powerful—more than any one Merman could naturally possess.

It would fade day by day if he let his time run down as he'd originally planned.

But that was not his plan anymore.

Gingerly, he placed his hand on Zoey's bandaged head.

Her eyes were bruised, and her cheeks swollen. The tube taped at her mouth had caused her lips to dry out and crack, and little flecks of blood still clung to the underside of her nose where she'd hit the rocks a second time as she'd fallen.

Adam would remember the sickening, crunching thud of her body as it struck granite for the rest of his life.

I'm sorry, he thought as he stroked one patch of exposed scarlet hair. *I should have been closer. I should have been watching more carefully.*

Frowning, he closed his eyes and forced his emotions to go still like a tidepool.

You shouldn't be punished for my failing, he thought, letting his magic unfurl from his center and down his arm to his fingertips. *I may not be able to take it back, but I can make it right.*

Warm currents crisscrossed his body, flowing to where his palm was pressed to Zoey's wound.

Expanding his aura, he hoped that maybe her subconscious would be aware enough to hear his message.

You were right about me, Zoey. You were right from the very beginning. I'm Merfolk, like the ones in your Grampy's stories and those pictures you showed me.

He exhaled as more and more magic left his body.

I won't be here when you wake up, but that isn't because I don't want to be. I have to go home now, and I don't know if I'll be able to return.

But if you get lonely, or whenever you're scared or sad, just look to the ocean, where the tide is at its fullest, and know that I'm there.

A single tear fell from his lashes, dropping onto Zoey's mottled cheek.

I'll always be there. You'll never be alone.

As the last wisps of magic ebbed from him and slipped into her, knitting her injured form back together, Adam gently kissed the top of her head.

Don't worry. You'll always be my best friend.

When he knew his healing magic had taken hold, he pulled his hand away and stood.

His limbs were the heaviest he'd ever felt, and exhaustion clung to every fiber of his being. Even the blood in his veins seemed to slow in its cycle through his body.

His heartbeat matched the trudging steps he took out of the room and into the brightly lit hallway.

He wanted nothing more than to sleep.

Forcing his legs to carry him back to the waiting room, his gaze found Rose with ease, like she was his north star ever present in the sky.

Glancing up from the magazine she was flipping through, relief spread across her face.

"Hey, there you are," she murmured as she reached for him. "I thought you'd gotten lost."

Shaking his head, he leaned down and kissed her with all the love he held for her.

It would never be enough.

"What was that for?" She asked, bumping the tip of her nose against his.

Staring into her eyes, Adam smiled.

The ocean blessed him when it brought him to Rose.

And if this was their last day together, he would not mourn.

"I love you," he signed as well as mouthed as he pressed his forehead to hers. *"I just needed you to know."*

* * * * * * *

Adam was dead on his feet as they walked to her car.

She thought it would take more convincing to get him to go home and rest, but when she'd suggested they head back to her cottage, Adam had simply nodded.

Rose could've sworn he was losing color in his face with every step they took.

"Are you hungry?" She asked, pulling her keys from her bag. "We could stop for something at the twenty-four hour minimart on the way home."

Adam swayed a little as he signed, *"I'm okay. But we can get something for you if you want."*

Shaking her head, she hit the key fob and opened her door. "I think I'd rather just eat some Triscuits in bed and call it a night."

It was a little after two in the morning. If they got to bed soon-ish, they could wake up before ten and grab breakfast on their way back to the hospital.

Buckling her seatbelt, Rose cast a sidelong glance at Adam and frowned.

"Hey," she murmured, touching his arm. "Are you sure you're okay? You look like you're not feeling well."

Leaning back against the head rest, Adam tilted his face to look at her. *"I'm just exhausted,"* he signed. *"I'll be alright soon."*

A chill swept down her back.

With the keys dangling from her ignition, she twisted in her seat.

"You're lying," she said firmly. "I know you're lying because that little hint of Prince Dexhart comes through in your eyes. Thankfully, you don't lie to me often unless it's about my movie choice or whether or not the hot chocolate I made is good, but just now you lied to me."

Adam dropped his stare, but he didn't argue.

"What is it?" She pushed, voice straining against the building panic. "What's going on?"

Taking her hand, he brought her knuckles to his lips. *"Zoey is going to be okay,"* he signed after a moment. *"She's going to wake up and be just as healthy and bright as she was before the accident."*

Rose scowled. "I know that. She's strong and the doctors said her prognosis is good…"

A pit formed in her stomach so swiftly it nearly made her retch.

"What did you do?" She breathed. "Adam? What… What happened?"

Ocean-violet eyes met hers, but they weren't as vibrant anymore.

Like the life was draining out of him.

And yet, he managed a weak smile as he held her stare. *"I made things right."*

Air. Rose needed air.

"Your magic." She cupped his jaw. "Did you heal my sister? Is that what this is?"

For the second time that day, she checked the pulse of someone she loved.

It was two times too many.

"Adam?"

"It took what was left of Isla's spell," he signed, barely able to hold his hands up. *"I have to… Go back."*

Pressing her thumbs under his jaw, she forced him to look at her.

"Go back? Go back where?"

She knew as soon as she asked.

The ocean.

Adam had to go home.

He coughed—a dry hacking that ricocheted off the windshield—and shut his eyes as he slumped down in the passenger seat.

“Shit,” she hissed. “Adam, c’mon, stay awake.”

Cranking the engine, Rose threw the car into reverse and sped out of the hospital parking garage.

Flooring it, she was never so grateful for empty small town streets as she blew through every stop sign and red light on the way to the nearest beach access.

It was the sandy shoreline that lead into the outcropping of rocks Adam had first washed up on.

Her favorite morning running path.

As she sped towards the water, she begged Adam to stay awake, to keep his eyes open, to sign to her—anything to keep him from slipping away.

His coughs were joined by rattling, wheezing breaths that couldn’t bring him enough oxygen.

“Almost there,” she told him. “You’re almost home. Just hang on, okay?”

Rose prayed to the only primordial deity she thought would listen.

The ocean herself.

Screeching to a stop in front of the public pathway opening, she cut the engine and ran around to his side of the car.

“C’mon, Adam, you can do this, okay? Just lean on me and walk,” she ordered, wrapping his arm over her shoulders and heaving him up.

They nearly fell to the ground every few steps. Adam was too heavy for her to carry on her own, and his knees could barely support him anymore.

His human form was trying to revert back.

Rose followed the sound of the waves in the dark, letting her instincts take her where he needed her to go.

Sliding in the loose sand, they toppled over, landing with a mouthful of grit.

Spitting, she hooked her arms under his and started dragging.

“Adam, please,” she cried out over the crashing waves. “Get. Up.”

By some miracle, he regained enough consciousness and strength to get his feet under him and stand.

Maneuvering them, Rose looped her right arm around his waist and guided him towards the water.

As soon as her feet splashed in the rising surf, she eased him onto his back.

Waves flowed over Adam’s body, drenching him, but his human form still remained.

Cursing, Rose fell to her knees next to him, gasping as the icy water soaked through her clothes.

“What do I do?” She asked, clutching his face. “Adam, tell me what to do? How do you turn back?”

His head lolled on a limp neck, wet hair clinging to his forehead and cheeks.

It was all too similar to the day she found him washed ashore.

Except this time she didn’t know how to help him.

Almost hip deep in the frigid brine, Rose clutched his chest and choked on a sob.

Staring into the oceanic void before her, she shouted, “Help! Help him! Please!”

Only the sounds of the waves replied.

Adam wheezed, his limbs twitching in pitiful spasms.

His *human* limbs.

His human body was failing and there was nothing she could do to trigger his transformation back.

The primal scream of utter despair and grief born from the first real heartbreak that she'd kept locked down deep in her soul clawed its way up her throat and erupted into the night.

"HELP HIM!"

An incoming wave rocked her back, but Rose barely felt it.

Dragging more air into her lungs, she yelled, "Are you really going to hide while your son dies? Are you really that cruel?"

Fighting the pull of the tide, she got to her feet, snatching a few smooth rocks from the sand.

"You call yourself a queen, Mira? Is this how a ruler treats her own flesh and blood?"

Chucking one of the rocks into the sea, she screamed for anyone to hear her.

"What kind of cold hearted bitch abandons her own child to die?" She threw another rock. "If you do this, then you are the monster that you think we are!"

A small orb of light shimmered beneath the surface of the water, almost blinding in the midst of the pitch dark.

"Prove me wrong," Rose shouted, throwing her last stone directing into the orb. "Prove how superior you are! Save your son!"

That light in the water grew, followed by roiling bubbles that broke apart the waves.

Rose planted her feet, refusing to give an inch.

Mira would have to face her as an equal.

The dark sea spun into a bright purple and white whirlpool, and a figure emerged from the center.

Her long, graceful tail curled, supporting her as she rose up from the water.

Scales dappled her torso and arms, and wide, slitted gills on either side of her neck opened and closed as she adjusted to being above water.

Webbed and clawed hands gripped a hooked spear that looked like a hand carved harpoon made of bone with a decorative handle.

Mira was terrifying and stunning, and in that moment, Rose hated her.

“You wanted a monster,” Mira said coolly. “Now you have one.”

Fighting a sneer, Rose leveled her stare on her. “You’re not a monster because of what you are. You’re a monster because of what you’ve done.”

Luminescent aquamarine eyes regarded her with disdain. “I have done nothing.”

“Exactly,” Rose spat. “Your son is dying and all you care about is politics and your own prejudices.”

“I told Dexhart my terms,” Mira said, a serpentine quality reverberating in her voice. “He was allotted the time left in my sister’s spell and no more. He said he would not return. Clearly he made his choice.”

Looking down at him, fresh panic banked some of her rage.

“He’s… doing this to himself?”

“All Merfolk control their own transformation.” Mira’s head tilted. “It’s possible he’s too weak to do so now.”

The waves that had been rushing over them parted, leaving Adam drenched and prone on the wet sand.

“His magic is depleted,” Mira added, watching him for a moment. “What happened?”

Rose gave up her stubborn ground, and returned to his side, kneeling in the algae and silt.

Pushing his sopping hair off his cheeks, she cradled his head.

“He saved my sister’s life,” she said, voice cracking.

Gulping for air, Adam’s eyes fluttered open for a moment but there was barely any recognition in his stare.

Swallowing back more sobs, Rose looked up at Mira. “He used all the magic he had left to save her. He sacrificed what he had to heal her because that’s who he is. Selfless and kind. Don’t punish him for being good. He doesn’t deserve that.”

Mira’s hardened expression cracked, a flicker of sorrow in her eyes.

“Dexhart did not want to come back,” she said, but her tone softened. “I should respect that—”

“Please,” Rose croaked. “He can’t die like this.”

“He was prepared to die in your arms once,” she said. “I cannot imagine that sentiment has changed now.”

Breathing through gritted teeth, Rose couldn’t stop the tears pouring down her face.

“He might have accepted that outcome, but I won’t,” she sobbed. “If he was willing to die with me, I’m willing to live without him.”

Mira’s intrigue was palpable. “You mean… You would give him up?”

Blinking away more tears, Rose nodded. “Save him, and I’ll let him go with you.”

“This would be permanent, human,” Mira said, straightening her spine and flicking the wide, glistening fins of her tail. “Dexhart will never return to you.”

Bitter grief burned her throat like acid.

“I know.” She stroked his pallid cheek. “But at least I can live the rest of my life knowing that he’s safe.” Despite her never ending heartbreak, her lips curved in a wavering smile. “That’s enough for me.”

For a time, only the gurgling ocean and stiff wind filled her ears.

Adam’s pulse was so faint she couldn’t feel it with her numbing fingers.

He wouldn’t last much longer.

“Your request will be granted,” Mira said finally. “My son will return to his home waters.”

Relief and devastation threatened to tear Rose in half.

Hunching over him, she wept into the crook of his neck.

Two more figures emerged from the whirlpool of light, breaking the surface of the water and floating into the shallows next to them.

Glancing up, Rose recognized one of the Merfolk drawing near.

“Odette,” she breathed.

In her true form, Adam’s sister was just as awe-inspiring and beautiful as their mother, but she lacked the icy demeanor of the queen.

“Hello, Rose,” she murmured, pulling herself up onto the sand.

Odette’s indigo and lilac tail flipped out behind her, splashing the water.

The other Mer-person kept their distance, eyeing Rose like she was a dangerous predator about to strike.

She didn’t blame them.

Odette sat up, leaning to the side and pulling her tail into a loose coil as her true form allowed.

“I’m sorry this is how we have to meet again,” she whispered, aquamarine eyes glowing faintly in the dark.

Rose sniffed. “Me too.”

In a flash of purple and white, the water crashed back down on top of them.

Before she could even blink away the salt in her eyes, the waves receded, revealing Adam.

The *real* Adam.

Gills opened on the sides of his throat, bringing him the oxygen he so desperately needed.

His large hands were made even wider by the webbing between each finger, and the dark, impossibly sharp claws elongating his digits.

But what stole her breath was his glorious, otherworldly tail.

Deep royal purple, violet, and shimmering pinks curved down the length, splitting into spiny fins tipped in gold.

He was all the colors of a sunrise after a storm.

It seized Rose's heart until she thought her chest would burst.

Bending over him again, she kissed his frozen lips, memorizing every curve and dip.

It was all she would have left.

Lifting a clawed, webbed hand, Odette gripped his arm to drag him back into the water.

Pinning him down with her own hand, Rose forced the woman to halt.

"Tell him…" She inhaled raggedly. "Tell him I love him. And that I'll always love him."

Compassion shone in Odette's eyes. "He knows," she said. "And he'll never forget."

With the rising tide, she pulled her brother off the sand and into the shallows.

Rose didn’t look away, even as Mira said, “It’s done. Go back to your people and we will go back to ours.”

In the light of the whirlpool, she could see Adam’s shape—his true shape—sink deeper and deeper, supported by Odette and the other Mer-person as they swam away.

Turning in the water, Mira watched her for a tense moment before diving under as well.

With them, the whirlpool faded, and the orb dimmed.

Soon, Rose was surrounded by darkness.

The void of the ocean. The inky, moonless sky pricked by thousands of tiny stars.

Alone.

She was all alone.

Crawling out of the surf, she collapsed onto the dry sand and pulled her knees to her chest. She prayed hypothermia would take her, but she never succumbed.

Curled up, with a gaping maw of anguish between each side of her ribcage, Rose waited for more tears to flow, for another scream to tear from her throat.

But dawn arrived first.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Rose's phone would not stop ringing.

The whole drive back to the Whittaker, as she fumbled to unlock her cottage, when she dropped down onto her couch and couldn't stand up again.

Ring. Ring. Ring.

She couldn't bring herself to answer it.

How could she? What could she possibly say to whoever was trying to contact her?

She didn't even feel like a person. How was she supposed to converse like one?

Rose must've dozed off sitting on her couch, because the next thing she knew, her door—that she'd forgotten to lock behind her—was flinging open and Everly was rushing inside.

"Jesus Christ, there you are," she called, arms flailing. "You weren't answering your phone, I thought you were dead. Did you even look at your messages? Zoey is awake."

Scrunching her eyes, Rose rubbed her face as her friend continued.

"She's not just awake, she's off intubation and talking and laughing and begging for ice cream." Everly laughed. "She's just like you and Derek, I swear. Your mom and dad are with her, and Derek just drove out to get everyone food. The doctors are saying they want to do some more tests but if those are clear, she can go home tomorrow."

Sparks of joy danced through the thick numbing fog in her mind.

Zoey was okay. She was healthy and alive.

Adam's magic had worked.

Stopping in the center of her living room, Everly stared expectantly at her. "Well? What are you waiting for? Let's go—"

Her gaze dropped to the sand caked in Rose's clothing and hair. The still damp clothes bunched uncomfortably on her.

"What…" Everly looked into her eyes and her mouth fell open. "What happened?"

Rose swallowed. "Adam's gone."

"Gone?"

She stepped closer but before she made it to the sofa, realization hit, and her gait faltered.

"Oh God," Everly breathed. "Rose…"

Leaning her elbows on her knees, Rose covered her face as a fractured sob escaped her.

In a flurry of movement, Everly climbed onto the couch next to her, hauling her into her arms and rocking her as more and more tears flowed.

"I'm sorry," Everly whispered into her filthy hair. "I'm so, so sorry."

She couldn't even bring herself to explain the whole story.

It still felt like a night terror she couldn't wake up from.

Vaguely, she felt Everly tug something from her jacket pocket.

"Derek? Hey, yeah, I'm here," she whispered into her phone speaker. "Rose is fine but uh… We're going to need some time, okay? I'll call you in the morning."

Hanging up, she dropped her cell onto the coffee table.

"C'mon," Everly said, urging her to stand. "Let's get you cleaned up."

* * * * * * *

Rose woke up under a heap of blankets and the weight of an arm draped over her.

In the lavender in between of sleep and awake, she almost believed everything from the previous night was nothing but a horrible nightmare.

But her limbs were achy and stiff, her throat was dry as sandpaper and raw, and her chest still ached like half her heart had been torn out.

She supposed, in a way, it had.

Twisting around, she spotted honey brown curls sticking out from another blanket lump and the corner of her mouth twitched.

Everly had guided her gently through every action.

She'd gotten her into the shower and helped her wash the grit from her hair.

She'd made her tea and toast with jam and made her eat and drink all of it.

She'd even dressed her in dry, warm PJs and got her into bed with a heating pad and multiple quilts to help her body temp come back up.

And on top of it all, she'd stayed the night.

Rose stretched her legs and bumped something at the foot of her bed.

Not something.

Someone.

Jerking her head up, she squinted at the second form covered in a quilt.

"Zoey?" She rasped, barely audible.

Movement from the corner of her eye made Rose jump.

"Hey," Derek whispered from her wingback chair he'd brought over to the side of the bed.

He was half-covered in one of her throw blankets with her 'So What If I'm a Masshole' throw pillow behind his head.

Propping herself up on her elbow, Rose blinked several times, trying to catch up.

“What are you doing here?” She glanced to the side. “Why is Zoey here? I thought she wasn’t being discharged until tomorrow?”

Derek smirked. “She woke up about ten minutes after you left, they took the tube out of her throat, and from the jump she was begging to see Adam.”

Pain sliced through her so strongly it would have knocked her down if she hadn’t been horizontal already.

“She wouldn’t take no for an answer,” Derek continued. “Kept ranting and raving. I thought mom was going to have a fit.” He chuckled softly, scratching his growing beard. “Finally the doctors ran enough tests to feel comfortable releasing her. But I had to swear on every sports team in New England that I wouldn’t leave her side. So… Here I am.”

Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, Rose asked, “Where are mom and dad?”

“Sleeping on a couple of those spare cots you keep at the inn,” he said, jerking his head to the left. “They said if you get into trouble for having people camp out in your kitchen, dad will make it all go away.”

Practically her whole family was there, for one reason or another.

It was too much for her to handle.

Willing away the fresh tears, she focused on breathing.

Finally, she looked up at her brother again.

“Adam’s not here,” she whispered. “He’s gone, Der.”

Understanding, sympathy, and a touch of anger colored his expression.

“Did he leave you?” He paused. “Or did he just leave?”

And what a distinction that was.

Rose plucked at a loose thread on the corner of her top quilt. “He had to leave. It wasn’t his choice.”

Derek nodded. “Is he coming back?”

“No,” she forced out. “He can’t.”

“Can’t…” He flicked his thumbnail a couple times as he thought. “I guess that’s not the same thing as ‘won’t’ or ‘doesn’t want to.’”

“I’ll have to trust you on that one.”

His brows twitched with amusement. “If you’re trusting me with anything, it must be really bad.”

Rose chuckled, but it crumbled into a weak sob.

In a flash he was up and out of his chair and kneeling next to her side of the bed.

“Hey, hey, hey,” he murmured, reaching for her hand. “It was a joke. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

Shaking her head, she wiped her eyes. “It’s okay,” she said. “It’s just…” She hiccupped lightly. “I don’t know what I’m going to do, Derek. I thought… I thought I’d finally found the person who made all the heartache and bullshit worth it. I thought I’d found my happy ending.”

Pressing his lips flat, he searched her face for a long time.

“Rose, *you’re* the person who makes all the heartache and bullshit worth it,” he said, holding her stare. “You survived some of the hardest things anyone could ever have to go through. And you did it because *you* are worth fighting for. You didn’t find your happy ending, you built it with your own two hands. And that’s impressive as fuck.”

His sincerity was a shock to her system.

Derek leaned in, offering a warm smile. “You’re the hero of this story. You’ll make a way through, I know it.”

Tears fell from her lashes, but the raged edge of her broken heart didn’t feel quite so painful in that moment.

From under the blankets, Zoey grumbled, “What time is it?”

“Early,” Rose and Derek said in unison.

Shoving her arm out, she sat up, scratching at the bandages still covering her head.

Taking one look at Rose, Zoey’s stare softened.

“Adam?”

Rose shook her head.

“He saved me, you know,” she murmured, tracing the floral print of her blanket.

Emotion clogged her throat. “Yeah, kid. He did.”

After a long moment, Zoey found her stare and held it.

“And I was right,” she said with emphasis.

It coaxed a smile from Rose.

“You were,” she said, reaching out to take her sister’s hand. “You really were.”

* * * * * * *

It took a full day before Rose could eat or drink anything more than toast and tea.

A day after that before she’d leave her bed for longer than a quick trip to the bathroom.

No matter how hard she tried, she just couldn’t find he energy to hold herself up.

But even when she could, the idea of ‘getting back to normal’ was comically agonizing.

There was no normal anymore. There was nothing to get back to because everything before was laced with him.

Now she only had after. Only had forward.

Derek was right—which was a huge surprise to everyone.

Rose was her own hero. She'd make a way through because that was her only option.

It still took her another day before she could go into the Whittaker.

Thank God Everly and Lex could pick up her enormous slack in the middle of busy season.

Dressed in a simple pair of black pants and a grey button down, Rose strode through the employee entrance, refusing to look at the door to Room Ten.

Crossing into the lobby, she braced for an onslaught of concerned pestering.

"Morning, Rose," Lex greeted, smiling at her softly. "It's good to see you again."

Their gentle words caught her off guard. "Oh, uh…" Rose returned their smile. "Thank you. You too."

"Here are all the copies of work orders, invoices, and deliveries that were made while you took personal time," Lex said, patting a stack of paper on the desk. "I made sure to confirm all our reservations for the rest of the month, and I've called back all the café dinner reservations too. So we're good to go."

Rose tried her best not to look like a newborn foal being put to work immediately.

"Thanks," she said, tugging at the hem of her shirt. "I appreciate all of this. Really."

"For you? Anything."

As they collected their belongings and said goodbye, Rose took a deep breath and held it.

She could do this.

Adam was gone, but she still had herself.

The phone rang, and she blinked away tears that threatened to spill.

Clearing her throat, she picked up the receiver. “Whittaker Inn, this is Rose. How may I help you?”

Chapter Twenty-Five

One Month Later

"Yes, Dominic, I know your paperwork says we ordered three cases of beef bouillon," Rose said into the phone as she opened the kitchen door. "But I have an order and a carbon copy, both signed by you, that says we ordered three cases of beefsteak. See the difference there?"

Weaving around the waitstaff, she B-Lined for the coffee maker, grabbing a mug.

"All we need is a fulfillment of our original order," she said as she poured. "Say, isn't your ex-wife in the meat business too? Gosh, I wonder how she's getting on. Maybe I should give her a call just to chat."

Setting the carafe back, she smirked as she listened to his hurried response.

"You'll replace the wrong order today? Thank you, Dominic, you're a real peach."

Hanging up, she turned to see Everly smiling at her.

"What?"

"Has anyone told you you're a little too good at that sort of thing?"

Sipping her coffee, Rose said, "If you think that was impressive, you should see my mother on the phone with campaign donors."

Before she could reach the door to leave, Everly called her back.

"Here, try this," she said, holding out a large cookie.

Rose sighed. "Is this your way of trying to make sure I eat?"

"No." Everly gestured vaguely. "Okay, well, yes. But that's not why I want you to try it. It's a new recipe and I want to see if it's good enough to serve with our butter pecan ice cream."

Taking a bite, Rose chewed thoughtfully. "A little less oat, a little more toffee."

“You always say more toffee.”

Grinning, she took her snack and coffee and shouldered open the kitchen door. “That’s because I’m always right about candy ratios.”

As she strode through the café, several locals waved and said hello, and she exchanged a few pleasant words, careful not to stop for too long.

On her way to the front desk, she snagged the mail stack to sort, and mentally added ‘water plants’ to her to-do list.

Heavy work boots announced Derek before she even saw him.

“Okay, I finished caulking the shower in Room Seven, I tightened the chain locks on Room Eight and Nine’s doors, and I oiled the window hinges in Room Four.”

Rose paused with her cup lifted. “I didn’t ask you to oil the window hinges.”

“No, but they needed doing,” he said, setting his toolbox down. “Everly back there?”

“Yes, and she’s busy, so don’t dally,” she told him. “Grab your payment of baked goods and get out.”

Derek chuckled. “You’re so bossy.”

“Yep, now do as I say.”

Waving him off, she focused on the computer and all the reservations she needed to confirm.

As she scrolled the email list, her hand absently sought out the fuzzy red lobster plushie next to her keyboard.

“Okay, Sebastian, let’s see about this vegan graduation dinner.”

* * * * * * *

Rose didn’t run much anymore.

She still got up every morning before the sun, dressing in her typical running gear.

But instead of trying to beat her personal best time around East Cove, she jogged down to the beach before any early rising locals or tourists could find their way out there and yanked off her sneakers and socks.

Walking right into the icy waves up to her ankles, she kicked and splashed in the water for several minutes, picturing the best memories she had of Adam.

It was a correlation she'd put together pretty soon after Mira's first visit to East Cove.

Every time Adam had come into contact with the ocean, a member of his family had found him.

Rose figured, if water could conduct electricity, maybe it also could conduct energy.

Specifically, her energy.

"So apparently Zoey's been begging my parents to let her attend this fancy arts camp in Vermont," she said as the waves lapped over her toes. "Which is why mom was acting so strange on Mother's Day. She doesn't want Zoey to go, but dad is all for it, especially since Zoey's been officially cleared for weeks. Which we have you to thank for."

Seagulls coasted above her, cawing as they dove for their morning meal.

"Grampy's thinking of selling the boatyard. Again." She chuckled to herself. "And Everly's updating the whole menu for the café, and she will *not* stop feeding me cookies. She'd kill me if I said this to her, but yours are better," she said with a smile.

As the sky turned from shades of pastels to a more vibrant orange and pink, transforming the water into liquid gold, Rose inhaled the salt air until her lungs were nearly bursting.

“I still haven’t cleaned out your room,” she admitted quietly, moving a stalk of seaweed with her big toe. “No one’s asked me about it either, which probably means they’re all still terrified of me crumbling into a million pieces at the mention of your name. But I honestly can’t blame them. Some days I think I’ll never get out of bed again. And then I remember you’d hate to see me like that, so…”

The soft chatter of voices reached her from the public access and Rose turned to see two elderly women dressed for a power walk approaching her side of the beach.

Dropping into a crouch, the kissed two fingers and dipped them into the water as the waves rushed in.

“I love you,” she said. “Stay safe. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

Withdrawing from the surf, she gathered up her socks and shoes, and after drying her feet, she pulled them back on and jogged back to the Whittaker.

* * * * * * *

“Uh, Rose, I think I messed this reservation up…”

Back tracking to the desk, she sipped her coffee as she looked over her new hire’s shoulder.

“Oh, that’s okay, Jeremy,” she said. “Just hit cancel and then bring up the last saved reservation.”

He did as she told him, and a relieved smile broke across his cleanshaven face.

“Thank you,” he sighed. “I was worried I’d really screwed up.”

Rose smiled up at him. “Don’t worry, there’s very little in this business that can’t be fixed with a couple key strokes.”

Gathering the orders she needed to confirm before mailing them off, she made her way to the kitchen.

Refilling her cup while Everly and Beau bickered about the best glaze to use for the pork chops, she leaned against the counter and watched silently.

Midsentence Everly turned on her. “How many cups of coffee is that today?”

Rose choked on her sip. “Since when are you keeping count?”

“Since you practically started mainlining the stuff,” she said. Gesturing to Beau, she added, “Fine, we’ll go with the cherry port glaze. But if people hate it, so help me…”

Rose grinned to herself, watching Beau glance over his shoulder at Everly appreciatively.

“Busy day, huh?”

Everly tossed a dish towel over her shoulder. “I’ve almost forgotten why I became a chef.”

“Because you love food, feeding people, and, oh yeah, food?”

“Right, thank you for that reminder.”

Pushing away from the counter, Rose started to leave when Everly called her back.

“Hey, do you want to go out tonight?”

With wide eyes, Rose looked around at the hectic kitchen. “Um… you want to go out… tonight?”

“This will all die down by eight,” Everly said with a wave. “We could go get drinks at the Rusty Anchor. Or try the wine bar again, despite the fact they still don’t carry a decent shiraz.”

Warmed by her friend’s attempt, Rose smiled. “Thanks but I’ll have to take a rain check. I have a lot to get done tonight.”

“Okay, well if you change your mind…”

Nodding, she escaped the kitchen before she could be offered yet another test cookie.

That evening, once Lex arrived and settled in to train Jeremy on night shift duties for a few hours, Rose grabbed two cardboard boxes from the closet and slipped into Room Ten.

Flicking on the light, she locked the door behind her.

The silence was jarring, but what was worse was the fading of Adam's energy in the room.

What was left was stagnant—stale air and unfinished business.

He couldn't haunt the Whittaker forever, she reminded herself as she put the boxes down on the bed still left rumpled from his last morning there.

Going to the dresser, she pulled out his favorite blue plaid button down and savored the material against her fingertips.

Bringing it to her nose, she shut her eyes, inhaled his scent, and let herself pretend he was there with her, if only for a few blissful seconds.

Remembering her mission, Rose folded the shirt and put it into one of the boxes.

She repeated the process until all of his clothing was out of the chest of drawers and stacked up in a neat pile.

Moving on to his art, Rose took more time sorting through all his sketches and notes.

Whittaker stationary with practiced letters, little snippets of sentences, words to look up.

Plain computer paper with pen drawings. Quality sketch paper and pads with graphite pencils and pastels.

She mentally calculated the size of several of his finished pieces, already planning where to hang them in the inn.

He couldn’t haunt this room, but he could still leave a piece of himself there.

A bound collection of papers under a pencil tin caught her attention, and she pulled it free.

‘*What you might have lost’* was written at the bottom of the first page, beneath a drawing of Rose’s cottage.

Turning to the next, she was greeted by a sketch of her—smiling and leaning on one elbow at the front desk.

‘This is Rose,’ Adam had written in his blocky handwriting. *‘She owns the Whittaker Inn. She’s funny and fierce and at first she’s guarded, but only because she thinks she has to be. But that’s not very important. What’s important is who she is to you. She’s your soulmate.’*

Her knees threatened to give out and send her straight to the ground, but she forced herself to stay upright.

Tears blurred her vision, but she turned to the next page anyway.

It was a drawing of her family with all of their names listed in order.

The next was of Everly, then Lex, and all the staff Adam interacted with daily.

He’d drawn pictures of the inn, the coastline, downtown, his favorite places to eat and stroll by.

He’d also sketched out maps and wrote down directions to navigate East Cove.

Then he’d drawn scenes from his life as a Merman.

The ocean creatures he loved, the caves his people lived in, his sister, his mother and…

Rose didn’t recognize the smiling male face looking out from the page.

Except… she did.

He might have had more signs of age, and his hair seemed a bit lighter, but the Merman on the page was wholly familiar.

It was Adam's father.

Underneath, he'd written, *'Your father Aleksi. He was a good, strong, brave man who put others before himself. He's been gone for a while now, but you're more like him than your mother would like to admit. Maybe that hurts her sometimes – to see the man she loved and lost so clearly, and so close, and yet so far away.'*

It was a clear, astute analysis of everything Rose knew of Mira.

On the last page was a letter to himself and every word tore her asunder.

'If you're here, and you need this booklet, that means you've lost your memories again. You're going to be scared and uncertain and you're going to feel lonely.

Go to Rose. She'll remember everything. Ask her to tell you the story of your love. It's the best story you're ever going to hear.

She'll only be able to tell you her side, but that's why I'm writing this. To remind you of how you felt the first time you ever saw her.

She was your sun. Your light on the horizon. She was the axis everything else rotated upon.

You didn't know that at first—You didn't know what you felt was love. You thought everyone saw her that way. But in reality, it was your universe rearranging. She's the piece you've always hoped existed. The treasure you always sought to find.

And she's yours.

She's all yours.

Be good to her. Love her well.

Her heart is worth carrying.

Chapter Twenty-Six

“I think Everly’s in denial about Beau having a crush on her,” Rose said to the waves. “Don’t get me wrong, he’s respectful, but it’s pretty clear to the whole staff that he likes her.”

She watched several birds dive into the shallows for a fish or mollusk as the rising sun backlit them.

“Jeremy’s doing great so far,” she continued. “My whole family practically jumped for joy when I told them I was hiring more people. But before you ask, I haven’t given Pete an answer yet. I’m supposed to meet him for lunch tomorrow to go over his proposal officially. I wish I could afford to tell him no, but…”

She drew a figure eight with her big toe in the water.

“I hung up the picture you drew of the Whittaker in the lobby,” she said, flashing a smile at the waves. “Guests have already noticed it, asking about the artist. I tell them you were a guest here too. I guess that’s as close to the truth as I can manage.”

A couple jogged onto the sand, approaching Rose’s end of the beach quickly.

She tried to suppress her flash of annoyance at having her time cut short.

“I should invest in Air pods,” she muttered. “At least then if I’m seen talking to myself, people will think I’m on a call.”

She winced.

“I know I’m not talking to myself. I know you’re there. It’s just…” She glanced up at the horizon. “A complicated reality.”

Before the couple got any closer, she stooped and ran her fingers through the water.

“I love you.”

Before she took her hand back, she could have sworn she felt the current shift around her fingertips, pulsing like a heartbeat.

* * * * * * *

Just beneath the surface, with his back pressed tight to the curve of an algae covered boulder, Adam closed his eyes and absorbed every ripple of energy Rose sent out into the water.

He couldn't always hear what she said, but he felt it.

Gods, did he feel it.

Each morning, before the cresting of the sun, he hid amongst the rocks several meters from shore and waited for Rose to visit.

He couldn't risk emerging to watch, despite the agony in his chest that screamed for her.

Adam took whatever solace he could in knowing that for those brief moments, they shared the same ocean.

"I love you," her voice and energy called to him, echoing deep in his marrow until it altered the new cells growing there.

Extending his aura, he called back to her.

"I love you too."

Opening his eyes, he tilted his head to the refracted sunlight above.

He'd skin himself on the shore just to see those morning rays dancing in her scarlet hair.

A new ripple of energy found him, jarring him from his longing.

"Dexhart," his mother's voice rang in his head. "We need to talk."

His stomach sank. This couldn't be good.

The first week of his return had been volatile. He'd refused to communicate with anyone except Odette, but even the words he had for his sister were sparse.

He’d defied his mother by coming so close to Rose again and again, and while she threatened every punishment imaginable, he didn’t waver.

If he was to spend the rest of his life like this, he saw no reason he shouldn’t seek a fraction of comfort where he could.

Undulating his tail, Adam curled in on himself and dove deeper and deeper, skimming the slanting bottom of the ocean floor as he returned to his pod.

Fish swam all around him, schooling up with their distant cousin as he sped faster through the brine, past decaying shipwrecks covered in marine life.

It was migration season for humpbacks, and in the distance, his sharp eyes spotted the giant silhouettes as they moved gracefully to more plentiful feeding territories.

Zoey would love to see such a thing.

Renewed sorrow washed through him, and he fought the ache in his sore limbs.

He’d never felt completely right since returning to his true form, as if his anatomy didn’t belong to him anymore, and his grief only exacerbated his discomfort.

Darting to the left, into the barely visible mouth of an underwater cave, Adam was plunged into darkness.

His eyes adjusted almost instantly, casting the rocky walls in hues of blue.

The tunnel widened and then dropped off into an enormous etched compound of bedrock, shells, and fossils.

His mother’s palace.

Adam didn’t have to swim far to find her.

Seated on a curved platform made for a Mer-queen, Mira stared directly at him.

She didn't speak until he'd slowed to float three feet from her.

"Dexhart, you and I need to discuss an important matter," she said, teal and white fins twitching as the water current bobbed them gently.

He clenched his jaw. *"Is it about my visits to the shore?"*

"Surprisingly, no."

He blinked. That was a surprise.

Two figures approached from above, swimming down to circle them before pulling to a halt at his mother's right.

Odette and Isla.

Suspicion crept down his spine.

Leveling her regal stare on him, his mother asked, "If you were to offer a member of this court the position of defense, who would you choose?"

Adam frowned. The defense position—the one that had started this whole thing—had been his.

So he was getting demoted.

Good.

Casting a glance to his left, he observed his aunt and his sister.

Were they here to bare witness to his further downfall?

"Dexhart?"

Gills flaring, he thought it over.

"The position should go to Odette," he signed.

Surprise rippled from his sibling. "Me? But—"

"You're an excellent strategist," he signed, cutting her off gently. *"You have a great knowledge of tactical maneuvers and more importantly,*

you care for your people. You would never risk their safety for anything unnecessary."

Their mother nodded once in contemplation.

Flicking his tail, he wondered if this meant he was being locked away in seclusion. Over a month of directly disobeying not only his mother, but his queen had to have severe consequences.

Rising from her platform, Mira swam to him, circling once with the momentum before stopping face to face.

"Do you *want* to give up your position of defense?"

"I never truly wanted it to begin with," he signed. *"I don't have any desire to hold a title."*

"Not even 'Prince'?" She asked, aquamarine eyes gleaming in the deep ocean light.

Holding her stare, he signed, *"I wasn't exactly given a choice in that."*

"But you have no affinity for it, do you," she said.

It wasn't really a question.

Still, he shook his head.

"I thought as much," his mother said.

Rolling her tail, she propelled herself forward, looping him slowly again.

"You've been back in your home waters for thirty-nine days, and yet you have barely made any attempt to rejoin your people."

The webbing between his fingers itched.

"Would you care to explain why?"

Letting the oxygen filtering into his blood calm him, he waited until she was in his eyeline again before signing.

“I’ve made my reasons clear. I don’t feel the need to spear open my wounds just so you can see if the sharks will deem my pain worthy.”

Odette hissed a mild warning to him, but he ignored her.

Their mother wasn’t deterred.

“When I came to your aid that night on the beach, I was very clear with your human woman,” Mira said. “I told her Dexhart would never return to her.”

He grit his teeth, wishing he could find himself inside a deep ocean salt lake.

His mother paused in front of him, holding his stare.

“And after thirty-nine days, it’s obvious Dexhart has not returned to us either.”

Scowling, he braced for the verbal assault. The insults, the accusations of him having turned his back on his people, of being insolent and selfish and bitter.

“I will admit, I struggle against the currents of my own life at times,” his mother continued. “I’m loath to yield to the lessons the Great Waters bestow upon me. But in this case, it’s become clear that my fight has only sunk the hook in deeper.”

Anger bled into confusion as he searched her face.

“You were born of the ocean,” she told him softly, reaching for his wrist. “And the ocean birthed you anew that day you were washed up on those rocks.”

A nervous tremor traveled down the length of his body all the way to the edges of his scales.

“You may have been Dexhart when you went to Isla for her spell work,” his mother said, glancing over her shoulder. “But from the moment you touched land, you were Adam. And Adam you have remained.”

His pulse thundered in his sensitive Merfolk ears.

Leaning closer, her voice dropped. “I should have listened to you. I should have looked past my own fear of losing you to see that you’d found something truly precious in this world.”

His brows knit together but before he could question her, she smirked.

“Did you think the water was only a conduit for you?” She tsked. “I suppose a Prince would believe such a thing.”

Adam shook his head. *“What… what are you saying?”*

“I’m saying I will be upholding my agreement with your Rose,” Mira told him. “Dexhart will not return to her. But Adam on the other hand…”

It was as if he’d been tossed into a whirlpool.

Dizzy and unable to find purchase, he was hardly able to keep himself afloat.

“You… You mean I’m… I can…”

Rushing to him in a swirl of bubbles, Odette took his hand.

“C’mon, brother,” she urged, wide smile splitting her face. “Let’s get you to where you belong.”

Before she could tug him too far along, he spun back.

Swimming at full speed, he collided with his mother in a powerful embrace, wrapping his arms around her and lifting them both up in a corkscrew formation.

“I won’t stay away forever,” he finally signed, staring into her eyes. *“I will come back. To you, to our home waters. I’ll—”*

“I know,” she said, clasping his hands with hers. “Merfolk can never resist the call of the sea. But now—” Soft light radiated from her grip, seeping into his skin and scales. “You have the power to choose.”

As the glow enveloped them both, she pressed her forehead to his and smiled.

It was the first real glimmer of happiness he'd seen from her in years.

* * * * * * *

Yanking her shoe on, Rose hopped on one foot, nearly tripping into her shrubs.

"Shit, shit, shit."

She'd overslept. How could she over sleep?

It was well past seven, but maybe she'd get lucky and find a secluded corner of the beach to at least dip her hand in and tell Adam a quick 'I miss you, I love you, I'll come back tonight at dusk to make up for being late.'

With her sneaker finally secure, she bolted down her path and around the corner of the Whittaker.

And right into her brother.

"Whoa, Jesus H.—" He took hold of her shoulders, keeping her upright. "Where's the fire?"

Rose blanched. "Fire? Is the inn—"

"No, Formula One, I meant where are you rushing off to?"

Stepping back, she smoothed a hand over her ponytail. "I—I slept through my alarm. I'm just trying to get a run in before work."

"Oh, okay, well…" Derek scratched at his stubble. "Can we talk?"

Rose sighed. "Can it wait? Like I said, I'm—"

"Going for a run, I know. But this is kind of important."

Her gaze flicked to the sky and the brightening sunlight.

"What if we talk when I get back?" She offered, already trying to skate by him. "Then you'll have my undivided attention."

“Rose—”

“Der, really—”

“I’m investing in your inn,” he blurted out.

Her feet rooted her in place.

Tugging at the bill of his Sox cap, he cleared his throat. “I talked to my accountant and my bank and since business picked up over the last couple years, I’ve got some cash to float.”

She couldn’t form words if her life depended on it.

“Pete’s offer has been nagging at me,” he continued, shifting his weight. “Maybe he was trying to make good, but he doesn’t deserve to call himself an investor here. This is your place, and it oughta stay that way.”

Taking several breaths, she finally regained the ability to use her tongue.

“You’re… giving me fifty thousand dollars?”

Derek tilted his head. “No. I’m giving you fifty-five.”

Her jaw popped with how fast it fell.

He chuckled. “Always gotta come to the table with a better offer, right?”

Rose swallowed, struggling to catch up. “What—”

“I saw how hard you and Everly were working to make that money on your own,” he said. “And I clicked how you really didn’t want Pete’s help, but you’d take it if it meant your business could grow. So why not get the help from someone who wasn’t a total asshole?”

She laughed, shock and incredulousness mingling, and he shrugged.

“Okay, well, I’m an asshole, but only in the normal, brother kind of ways.”

That only made Rose laugh harder.

“So what do you say? Partners?”

“I’d have to talk to Everly first…”

Derek smirked. “I already asked her. She said she’s in if you are.”

Planting her hands on her hips, she squinted up at him. “You talked to Ev before you talked to me?”

“To be fair, she’s usually nicer to me than you are.”

The full weight of his offer finally struck her, and emotion welled to the surface, causing her eyes to mist.

“Oh geez, not again,” he muttered, reaching for her. “I swear I’m just joking.”

Rose shook her head. “No, no, it’s not…” She choked back the lump in her throat. “I’m in,” she said. “Partners.”

Derek smiled and bumped her arm. “Partners.”

* * * * * * *

Running down the sloping loose sand, Rose heaved a sigh of relief.

No one was on the beach. She could linger a bit without fear of being overheard.

Aiming for the dead center of the shoreline, she slowed her pace and took a deep breath of salt air.

Her love of the ocean hadn’t diminished but it certainly felt more complicated now than ever.

When she reached the best spot to dip her hands in, she stooped and grazed her fingers through the waves.

“I’m so sorry I’m late,” she murmured, watching bits of mussel shell and seaweed whirl and drift by. “Can you believe I overslept?”

From the corner of her eye, she spotted a shadow just as a woman said, “Only someone as driven as you would consider just past sunrise ‘sleeping in.’”

Jerking upright, Rose spun to face…

“Isla?”

She’d been mistaken—there were two people with her.

Odette stood next to her aunt, wrapped in a teal shawl and smiling sweetly.

Panic flared in Rose’s gut. “What’s wrong? Did something happen?”

Isla shook her head, damp curls bouncing around her face. “Oh, no, nothing is wrong, dear.”

Frowning, Rose asked, “What—What are you doing here?”

Adjusting the octopus broach on her shawl, Odette said, “I’ve had the most intense craving for the caramel latte at the Scuttlebutt.”

Bewilderment made her head buzz. “You’re here for coffee?”

“She might be,” Isla said, gesturing to Odette. “But I just came to see the look on your face.”

“What look?”

Both women shifted their gaze just past her right shoulder.

“The one you have when you turn around.”

Rose she sensed him before she even moved an inch.

Hope bloomed in the middle of the terrifying fear taking up residence in her chest.

Stiffly, she faced the water’s edge.

Her gaze found the glowing whirlpool first, and then the figure emerging out of it.

Rose couldn’t breathe.

It had to be a dream. An elaborate hallucination.

But as he stepped onto the shore, flinging his wet, black hair off his forehead, the reality of what was in front of her threatened to overwhelm her barely beating heart.

“Adam?” She whispered into the wind.

The soaked loose-fitting white button down and dark pants clung to him as he left the waves, but it only cemented just how real the scene before her was.

He was in his human form. He was on land. He was…

Smiling.

“Adam!” She cried, taking off at full speed down the beach.

Rose screamed his name again and again as each foot fall kicked up clouds of sand.

And he was running to her too.

Leaping into his arms, she wrapped herself around his torso as he swung her into the air.

In that moment, she trusted what was happening.

A mirage couldn’t spin her in a circle, couldn’t hold her so tightly her ribs almost crushed, couldn’t cradle the back of her head and press his face into her neck.

“You’re here,” she half-sobbed into his dripping hair. “How are you here?”

He couldn’t answer her without letting her go, and that wasn’t something he seemed inclined to do.

Instead of easing her to the ground, Adam hoisted her legs around his waist so he could keep her in his arms for longer.

Rose clutched his damp face, kissing away the salt water from his eyes and cheeks and lips.

So delirious with joy her mind was close to breaking, she slanted her mouth over his, tasting him and the ocean.

He was here. He was alive.

He was hers.

Pulling back, she stared into his violet eyes. “It’s you. You’re really here.”

Beaming up at her, dimple in his left cheek so deep it cast a shadow, Adam nodded.

“It would seem my sister had a change of heart,” Isla said as she approached with Odette. “The terms of the deal made for him were renegotiated.”

Rose glanced from her to Adam. “Does that mean—?”

He nodded. *“I’m staying,”* he mouthed.

With another deep kiss, she wriggled free from his hold and put her feet to the ground.

“What happened?” She asked, still gripping the front of his soaked shirt.

Adam ducked, kissing her once, twice, three times more. *“It’s a long story,”* he signed. *“But I get to stay as long as I want.”*

Gaping, Rose turned to Isla. “Your spell—”

“It wasn’t mine, dear. It was Mira’s,” she said with a grin. “She gave Dexhart an invaluable gift—autonomy.”

“I’m still a Merman,” he signed. *“But now I get to choose how long I stay in either place. No spells or lost memories or anything.”*

He could have told her he had to sleep every night in a bathtub of sea water and Rose wouldn’t have cared.

She had the other half of her heart back.

Tears welled over her lashes and Adam brushed them away with his thumbs.

“Don’t cry,” he mouthed. *“I’m here.”*

Pressing her hands over his, she kissed his palms.

Yes, he truly was.

“I have so many questions,” she admitted with a weak laugh.

Adam nodded, kissing the center of her forehead. *“I’ll answer them all.”*

“Ooh, could we do that over pancakes?” Odette asked, clasping her hands together. “I didn’t get to try any when I was last here, and I’ve heard they’re delicious.”

“You should also try Belgian waffles,” Isla said. “I’m not sure what makes their nationality different, but they are certainly tasty.”

As the women chattered around them, Rose could only stare at the man she loved.

The man who’d returned to her.

Her Adam.

“You’re really mine,” she whispered.

Dropping a tender kiss to her lips, he smiled against her. *“I’m yours. And now it’s forever.”*

Stepping through billowing seafoam, Isla called over her shoulder, “Come along, you two. We have a wonderfully bright day to enjoy.”

Laughing, Rose took his hand, tugging him up the beach to the boardwalk.

To East Cove.

To the rest of their lives waiting for them.

The End

Also by Lauren Devora

Children of Lilith

Children of Lilith: Book of Bedlam

Blood Soaked Earth

My Friend Mothman

About the Author

Lauren Devora is a North Carolina native who currently lives in the greater Boston, MA area with her two dogs and massive coffee mug collection. She can be found meandering in bookstores and graveyards, and posted up at her favorite pub.

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